

New Worlds

VOL I FICTION OF THE FUTURE No. 2



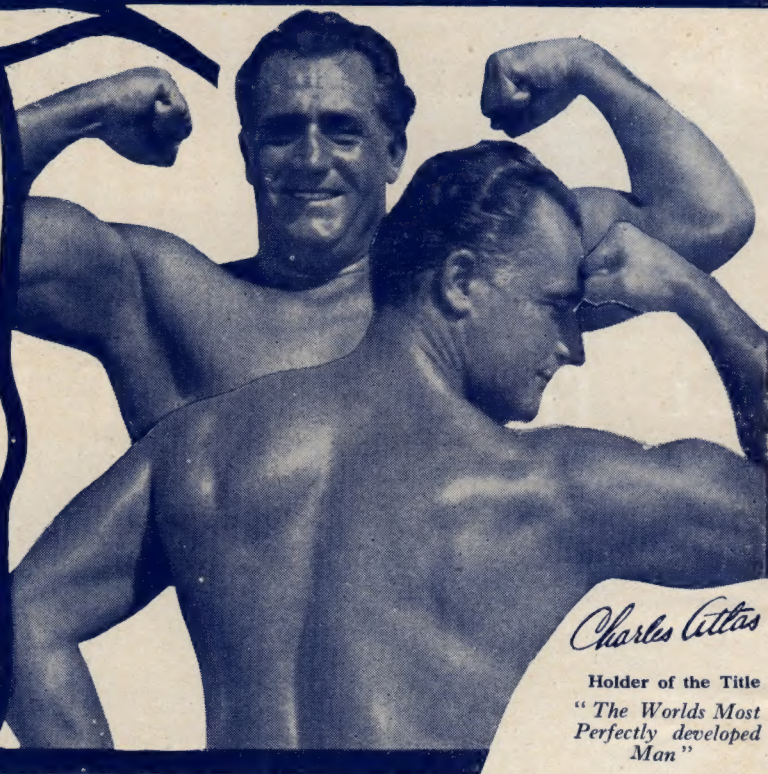
SPACE SHIP 13

by

PATRICK S. SELBY

2 1/2

**"I'll
PROVE
in only
7-Days
that I
can make
YOU a
NEW
MAN!"**



Charles Atlas

Holder of the Title
"The Worlds Most
Perfectly Developed
Man"

...back and front-through and through-inside and out!

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All characters in these stories are purely fictitious and any resemblance to real persons is entirely coincidental

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THE LIVING LIES

By JOHN BEYNON

A beautifully written sociological story. Venus had a colour problem with four races trying to live in harmony—yet on different social scales. Only it wasn't a problem at all—to the Venusians.

I

FIVE little Green girls wrangled on the sidewalk; the central disputants held, one the legs, and the other the arms, of a large doll.

"You said I could have her to-day," yelled Legs, bitterly.

"No, I didn't. You had her yesterday," screamed Arms. "I want her."

"You said I could," Legs persisted doggedly.

"She's mine. You let her go." Arms tugged violently. The doll's stitches strained, but it held together. "Will you let go?" howled the one who held the arms.

On the last word she tugged with all her weight. The suffering doll's arms tore off. The child, still holding them, staggered back and fell into the roadway. Her shriek, as a wheel crushed her, was drowned in the screams of her four little friends.

Leonie Ward, her hands on the wheel, her foot hard down on the brake, did not scream. Something seemed to take her by the throat, she felt her heart turn over inside her and her face went sickly pale. For an instant everything appeared to stop, held in a ghastly tableau. The people transfixed in the street, the car hanging on its gyroscopes, Leonie frozen in the driving seat; the only sound an unforgettable scream.

A woman flung herself into the road and dragged the child's crushed body from between the wheels. For a moment she clasped it, then she looked up. The girl, half-stunned, had not moved from the wheel; she shivered as their eyes met. The woman's face and the hands were as green as those of the child she held; it made her hatred and anguish the more horribly terrifying. Without lowering her burning eyes, crouched with the dead child pressed against her, she began to scream threats and curses.

There was a crowd round the car now, a ring of green faced men and women rapidly pressing closer. Still Leonie sat unmoving, unable to think or act, but feeling the growing hostility of the crowd.

Two burly men in uniform came shouldering their way through the press. They made a strange con-

trast with the others, for their faces beneath their padded hats and their hands, already clutching batons in readiness for trouble, were a brilliant magenta in colour. They worked close to the cream car and began pushing the people back.

"Now then, get along. Move along there."

One of them went to the mother of the child. Not unkindly he laid a hand on her shoulder. She shook it off, sprang to her feet and spat at him.

"Don't you touch me, you filthy Red."

There was a murmur in the green-faced crowd. The woman seemed to forget him for a moment. She leaped towards the car and clawed at Leonie through the open window.

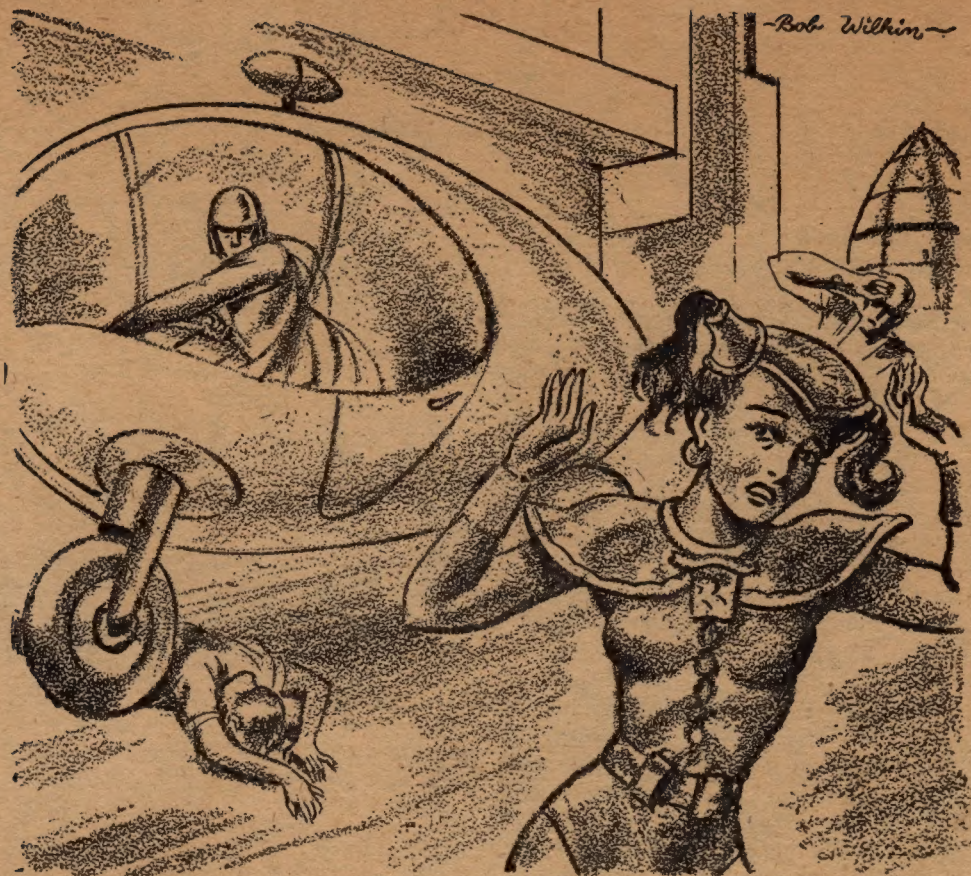
"You murderess. I'll kill you for that."

A uniformed arm came over her shoulder and pulled her away. She turned and raked at the man's red face with her nails. He put up a hand to save his eyes.

"Bloody Green bitch," he muttered, fending her off.

"D'you hear that?" she shrieked. "D'you hear what he called me?"

THE crowd had. Someone put an arm round the red man's throat and dragged him backwards. Half a dozen green-faced men and women leapt upon him; simultaneously his companion went down in a whirl of crashing fists. From one of the fallen policemen came a scream of shuddering agony. It brought Leonie suddenly alive again. In terror she struck at the green arms reaching in to seize her, desperately she sought to restart the engine. With panic in her veins she did not care if she cut down a dozen of the Green people if she could only thrust clear of the mob. But even as the engine came to life she felt the car rise and sway, and knew that they had lifted the driving wheel clear off the ground. A green hand caught her wrist and wrenched it off the wheel, she was dragged half out of the window. Her shoulder socket hurt like fire; she felt her arm being torn off like the doll's. A row of gloating green faces awaited her. Then the whole car tilted beneath her and a curtain of black fell over everything.



SHE was lying on her back, looking up at a white ceiling. There was a moment before it all came back, then, fearfully, she turned her head. Close beside her she saw a face that was not green, magenta or black, but the pink and white of her own race. She burst into tears of relief, aware through them of a hand which patted her shoulder and a voice which tried to soothe her, but unable to stop the storm of weeping.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, as it subsided. "I'm sorry to be such a fool."

"Nonsense," a voice told her. "Best thing you could have done. Now drink this. No, don't try to move. I'll hold it."

A hand raised her head slightly. Another held a glass to her lips. The spirit stung her throat, but it worked like an elixir. In a few minutes she began to feel like an utterly new person.

She turned and studied the man beside her. Later middle aged, fifty-five, perhaps sixty, she judged. His hair was mostly grey, and surmounted a finely shaped, ascetic type of face. The eyes were grey, too, and kindly, with fine webs of little wrinkles at the corners; the mouth was firm, but without hardness.

"What happened? Where am I? Who are you?" she asked, almost in one sentence.

The man smiled.

"My name is Francis Clouster and this is my house. A friend of mine brought you here."

"But how did I get out of that crowd?"

"He'll be able to tell you that better than I can. I'll call him." He went to the door and opened it. "Jimmy," he said, "the lady would like to see you."

Leonie recoiled involuntarily at the sight of the man who came in. She had expected a man of her own kind. The newcomer was green as a grass lawn. The two men either did not notice or affected not to notice her movement.

"This is Jimmy Craven," the older man introduced, "Miss . . . ?"

"Leonie Ward," Leonie told them.

"Miss Ward would like to hear what happened, Jimmy," said the older.

"I happened to be there when the accident took place," the Green man said. "It was quite obvious to anyone who saw it that no driver could have avoided it. You were as quick on the brake as anyone could possibly be. No blame whatever can be attached to you. But most of the people who were in the crowd didn't actually see it happen. Even so, it might have passed off quietly but for that Red policeman."

"Just as your car went over, a squad of Red police turned up. Green police might have smoothed things over, but that mob was just right for trouble with

Reds, they'd killed two already, and they went bald headed for this lot. In the mix-up I saw that half-crazy woman making for you. Your left arm was jammed under the car so that you couldn't have fought her off, even if you'd been conscious. So I chased her off, managed to get your arm free, and carried you out of the mess. If anybody noticed they probably thought you were an injured Green, because I'd put a rug over you."

LEONIE was watching him as he talked, deciding that he was personable and, but for his colouring, might have been handsome. Possibly in the eyes of another Green he actually was so.

She thanked him as he stopped. He shook his head.

"It was common justice. The accident was in no way your fault. That women was crazy enough to have killed you, or defaced you for life. If you don't mind my saying so, it was extremely rash of you to come here alone at all. And in the circumstances you are lucky to have got off as lightly as you have done."

"I don't feel as if I had got off exactly lightly." "You've been pretty well bruised," put in Clouster, "but your main injuries are a compound fracture of the left forearm and a badly strained right shoulder."

"I wonder the shoulder wasn't dislocated; it felt like it. But, tell me, why shouldn't I have come here alone?"

"I should have thought that was obvious enough." "Do you mean I might have been attacked even if there had not been an accident?"

"I do."

"But why?"

Her host and the Green man looked at one another.

"Weren't you warned against it?" Clouster asked.

"Oh, yes, they did say something. But they used to tell me to be careful of all sorts of places on Earth and nothing ever happened."

"Venus," said Clouster, "is not Earth. Do you mean you've only just come here?"

"Well, I've only just come back—about a month ago—they sent me to be educated on Earth. I was very young when I left."

"I see. Well, I'm afraid you're going to find that a lot of things you can take for granted on Earth are very different on Venus. There is not the problem there of the Reds, the Blacks, the Whites of our kind, and the Greens of Jimmy's."

"There are Black men on Earth."

"So there are, but they have learned to co-operate with Whites and Yellows."

"They must be very different from our Blacks," the Green man put in, bitterly. "All ours want to do is to rule."

He looked up and caught the older man's expression.

"Yes, I know that's not what you like to hear, Francis, but, hell, it's true."

"And the Greens?" inquired Clouster.

"They want justice and permission to live in peace: is that too much?"

"That's just what the Blacks tell me."

"Oh, well, if you believe them——"

"Why not try believing them a bit, Jimmy? After all, what's the difference beyond the colour of our skins?"

The Green man rose.

"Sorry. If you're going to preach, Francis, I'm leaving. Goodbye, Miss Ward. I'm glad to have been able to help you."

Francis Clouster looked at the door as it shut.

"And there," he said, turning back to Leonie.

"There you have the state of Venus in a nutshell."

"Tell me some more about it," Leonie said.

"All right. But hadn't you better send some message to your family first? I'm afraid it won't be possible for them to fetch you to-night. There's too much trouble round here, but you ought to let them know. I'll bring you the telephone."

Leonie spoke into the instrument while he held it. It roused in her the feeling, always latent, that in coming back to Venus she had gone back a few centuries. Telephones, because radio wouldn't work on Venus, but it wasn't only the lack of radio. . . .

MR. MATTINGTON Ward returned to the dinner table.

"It was Leonie," he explained to his guests.

"She's over in Chellan. Bit knocked about in a Green and Red riot, I'm afraid. Tells me not to worry, but to come over and fetch her in the morning when the neighbourhood's quietened down a bit. She's right, too. Police say there's quite a bit of trouble down there."

The most important of his guests looked at him hard. Wilfred Baisham, head of the Venus Mineral Products Consolidation, had not only a dominating position, but an authoritative personality.

"Chellan?" he said. "What the devil was your daughter doing in Chellan?"

"Taking a short cut, I understand." Mr. Ward, if he resented his guest's tone, did not show it.

"But Chellan!"

"I've warned her, of course, but I suppose she didn't really appreciate it. I don't suppose it's too easy for her to grasp at first."

Mr. Baisham said, weightily:

"I don't approve of the practice of sending Venus-born children to Earth for education. It gives them false standards. How can they be expected to have a proper appreciation of our system when they are educated in another. It just gives them subversive ideas which they have to unlearn before or after they get into trouble."

Mr. Ward made no reply. Indeed, at the back of his mind, he agreed with his guest. He would have

preferred to have Leonie educated at home and would have done so but for the promise he had made to her mother. He had kept that promise in spite of a feeling that he was alienating his child and a fear that she might not be able to feel at home on Venus any more than her Earthborn mother had done.

"Who's looking after her?" Mr. Baisham inquired.

"Some people called Clouster, I gather."

"Oh, yes, I know. Idealists, type that might have been missionaries on Earth at one time. They do some kind of social work in Chellan. They'll look after her all right." He smiled at a thought. "Funny, isn't it, these people who give their lives to spreading brotherly love among Greens, Reds and Blacks. You'd think it would dawn on them that if people have to be told to love one another all the time there must be some pretty good reason why they don't. But it doesn't seem to. Well, it's probably a good thing; it'll teach your daughter to keep clear of Chellan and such places in future."

Again Mr. Ward found himself in agreement. Leonie had given him no details of her injuries so that his impression was that she had had a scare—there was nothing like a touch of that kind of wind up to show a girl the necessity for conventions and taboos.

"NOW tell me about Venus," Leonie directed. "Nobody has, except for what I learned at school. It's all so usual to everyone here that they don't bother to explain any of it. Now and then they say 'Don't,' that's all. Now, like the geography book: 'The inhabitants of Venus are of four types . . .'"

" . . . the Whites, the Greens, the Reds and the Blacks," he took her up. "But I quarrel with your word 'types.' They are all the same type—only their skins are different colours."

"They wouldn't thank you for that from what I've heard."

He nodded. "They wouldn't; that's the tragedy."

He went on to describe the Venusian social state, speaking not as a White, but as one who had tried to consider himself as one of all the four classes. As for the Whites, their position was simple, they were of Earth stock on both sides and some of them actually Earth born. They dominated socially, industrially, commercially: they were, in fact, the undisputed ruling class, they despised the coloured peoples, and the one common sentiment of the three colours was dislike, tempered by fear, of the Whites.

Leonie nodded. "Something like all the little nations on Earth before the Revolutions led up to the Great Union," she suggested.

"Very like, in some ways," Francis Clouster agreed, "but even more tragic here. On Earth there were physical differences as well as different languages to be overcome. Here the language is the same, the physical structure is identical. They differ in nothing but their skins—and they do not, they

refuse to, know it. My wife and I know it. We have lived among Greens, Reds and Blacks; we have friends of each colour whom we trust, but who would hate one another at sight if we were to allow them to meet. You saw just now how even an intelligent Green reacts when one mentions a Black."

"But he saved me—a White."

"Certainly. You are a girl and very good looking. The dislike of the colours for the Whites is different from their dislike of one another, it is based on envy, not contempt. That makes a lot of difference, you see. I don't want to be uncharitable, but it wouldn't surprise me to hear that Jimmy is rather fancying himself for having rescued a White girl."

He went on to talk of the three colours and the hatred they held for one another. How the Reds believed that the Blacks were dirty and dishonest, and the Greens were vicious and sly to a man: how the Greens and Blacks considered the Reds to be bullies and braggarts, frequently unstable in the small amount of brain they possessed. How the children of all three groups grew up in their homes and in their separate schools, hearing these things from their earliest years and believing them.

"There's a parallel for that, too, in Earth history," Leonie observed. "There was teaching like that against Jews."

"Certainly. There are plenty of parallels. Too many. But the good one is yet to come." He sat silent a minute, lost in thought.

"You mean like the Great Union?"

HE nodded. "There was a day on Earth when the people revolted. They refused any longer to be thrown into slaughter of and by people of whom they knew nothing, for the profit of people who exploited them. They rose against it, one, another, and another, to throw out their rulers and rule themselves. And so came the Great Union. Government of the People, by the People, for the People, over the whole Earth. How long will Venus have to wait for that?"

"You are a revolutionary?"

He looked at her steadily. "Yes, I suppose I am that. A revolutionist with no party to lead," he smiled wryly. "Quite harmless to the Whites and their authorities, I assure you. If I were to collect a following of Greens, the Blacks and Reds would unite to crush us: if I collected Reds the Blacks and Greens would combine. We should slaughter one another while the Whites went on living comfortably, untroubled."

"But how did this happen? Who are these coloured peoples, where did they come from, and why do they hate one another so much?"

"That is not clear. They are said to be descendants of the first Earthmen who came to Venus long ago and mated with the natives. The theory is that the natives died out from contact with civilisation as some races died on Earth, but not before the

ancestors of our present Blacks, Reds and Greens were fairly numerous."

"What else could it be?"

"Exactly. What else?"

Leonie had opened her mouth to speak again when the door suddenly swung wide. A young man, green as her rescuer had been, strode in without noticing her where she lay on the day-bed.

"Hullo, Dad, is Mother a . . ." he broke off suddenly as he caught sight of her. There was a moment's silence.

"Is Mother Clouster about, Francis?" he asked, in an uncertain tone.

II

LEONIE returned home to spend her convalescence in her father's house on a slight rise overlooking the city of Tallor. The period coincided with that nostalgic depression which afflicts all but a few of the new arrived or newly returned on Venus. Leonie felt it the more since the best antidote of exercise was barred for her.

The garden was planted in pathetic imitation of gardens on Earth, with plants and flowers specially imported, yet in spite of sunlight lamps and prepared soil the blooms were pallid versions of those which grew naturally in Earthly gardens. They were unnatural, too, in losing their seasons, so that here, at the end of the Venus winter, Leonie discovered spring and autumn flowers struggling into bloom together. From the terrace where she spent most of her time she could make out the suburbs, Chellan where the Greens lived, Barro the Red quarter, Tingan which was almost entirely Blacks.

And in each she could see the big blocks of factories and warehouses where the people worked. North lay the cleared and cultivated country where they grew either indigenous crops or species bred by careful crossing with strains from Earth. West, where the ground was lower and waterlogged rose the thick wall of swamp forest cut by the broad channel to the sea. South lay more forest, it looked weakly and unhealthy to her eyes because of the paleness of its green, but, nevertheless, it was formed in reality of sturdy Venusian trees quite different from the soft growths of the swamp forest.

Venus knows no horizon line. All the way round the scene grew hazy at the edges, disappearing in the haze which thickened imperceptibly into the clouds. Sometimes above the southern forest she saw the clouds glow red as if a sunset tried to struggle through them; there was a distant, trembling roar and one knew that a rocket ship had arrived or had taken off from the great port clearing twenty miles beyond the city.

It was the haze and the ever hanging clouds which depressed the Earth-accustomed. Never to see the sun, never to have a clear view, never to see a sharp cut shadow on the ground; despite the fact that the light was good its perpetual diffusion made them

feel that they were living in a kind of monotony of twilight.

Everybody assured Leonie that this was to be expected; that all newcomers felt a lowering of spirit at first, and that it would pass, but she found it hard to believe. She was aware of a growing dislike for the planet, for its inhabitants, and for the kind of life which lay before her. She did not care for the standards of her father's friends. She found in them a self-satisfied, almost callous, strain which was continually shocking her Earth-trained mind. The narrowness of their interests bored her and the lavishness of their style of living troubled her.

In Milota, their residential district of Tallor, no luxury that money could buy went unbought. Down in the coloured districts there was poverty and struggle without end, men and women living in warrens which must surely be as bad as those of Earth before the Great Union. Even Rome at its greatest, Leonie felt, could scarcely have shown greater discrepancies, yet it left Milota undisturbed. Beyond the occasional distribution of a little condescending charity Milota maintained its amusements and pursuits as though the people whose labour supported it did not exist.

IT was the dull weeks of her convalescence which made her give more attention to those things than she might otherwise have spared; which made her feel strongly the sense of being a stranger among strangers, and set her clinging grimly to anything which made Earth seem closer. Much of her time was spent with a little recorder in her lap through which she dictated endless letter-reels of her impressions to her distant friends. Whenever a mail rocket came in she fell upon the reels addressed to her and hurried away to a quiet corner where she could listen to the little voices coming out of the machine, with her eyes closed, pretending that Venus did not exist. It was no way to cure Earth-sickness, but she did not wish to be cured. For the same reason she burnt herself painfully with her sunlamp, over-using it for fear she might under-use it and grow pale like a true Venus dweller.

There was little company for her during the long days and seldom, except in the evenings, anyone to talk to but the Magenta-Red house servants. From them she learned much to substantiate the things she had heard from Francis Clouster down in Chellan. The mention of a Black or a Green to any of them brought a curl of the lip which, off duty, would undoubtedly have been a sneer. The Reds, she discovered, considered themselves the aristocrats of the coloured peoples, ranking a little below the Whites themselves. It was later she learned directly the Greens' opinions of the Reds—that not only were they bullies as Clouster had said, but that they were toadies and sycophants of the Whites, who chose them for house-servants and bribed them into meanness. It was impossible to get past those things, in

every direction these barriers of colour cropped up—and every worth-while position was reserved for the Whites.

In those eight weeks was thoroughly planted and set an idea which was never uprooted—that the basis of Venusian society was a state of hatred and spite.

By the time she was recovered enough to drive the new car with which her father had replaced the smashed one, spring had come and the vegetation, never slow of growth, was bursting upward and outward with a furious energy almost alarming to a stranger. It was a season when hours of work in the factories had to be cut, and Leonie went out with parties of other Whites to watch the released workers fighting the encroaching forest back from the city's outskirts and keeping it off the cultivated lands with hatchets and flame throwers.

There were expeditions to the flower groves. She took part in them but they disappointed her. Venusian flowers were almost all simple and primitive, not unlike magnolias, lovely to touch, making the air heavy and sweet with their scent, but appealing little to the eye. All the way they went they passed gangs of Greens or Blacks and sometimes Reds, hacking and burning back the vegetation which threatened to choke the roads.

There was another expedition which took her down to the sea. That was somewhat disappointing, too. The sea when reached looked much as the sea does anywhere else on a dull day, and you couldn't do anything with it when you got there: you couldn't go out in a small boat, because one good snap from one of the saurians and it would be the end of you and the boat; and you couldn't bathe because the water swarmed with tiny sharp toothed fish who would attack in thousands and have all the flesh off your bones in a few minutes. Even a picnic meal was a fidgety business; one of the party had to act sentry all the time for fear something or other dangerously nasty should come crawling out of the sea. There were occasional longer jaunts by plane to other cities which neither in themselves nor their inhabitants were noticeably different from Tallor.

LEONIE began to find the first strangeness wearing off. Her eyes became accustomed to the softer colourings and she began to perceive delicacy of shading where before she had dismissed a view as merely "grey." The scarcely recognised sense of claustrophobia caused by the hazy blanketing of all horizons began to wear off. But she refused to believe that she liked Venus any more. The furthest she would go was to admit now that it might be made just tolerable, whereas before she had not believed even that.

One of the first things she had done when she was able to get about was to join a society of Whites which proclaimed charitable and philanthropic intentions towards the less fortunately coloured. It

took her one meeting to discover that it existed chiefly to enhance the self-esteem of its own members, and three to resign, somewhat curtly, her association with it. Inquiries revealed another society, but one which existed it seemed, solely to rival the first. It took her some little time to get on to the track of one which appeared to have more serious intentions than social ambitions, and it was Francis Clouster who told her of its existence.

She had visited him several times—taking precautions suitable for the district—partly to thank him and his wife, Marion, for their care, but even more because they were the only people she knew who seemed to share in any way her own feelings on the injustices of Venusian life.

She pleased him by her opinion of the societies she had already investigated.

"Rubbishy," he agreed. "The real effect of charitable societies like that is to bolster up the very conditions which make them necessary."

"But there must be others who are seriously interested?"

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"You might try The Pan-Venus Club, perhaps."

"Do you belong?"

"I did. I — er — fell out with them. It might be wiser not to tell them you know me."

"Why did you fall out?"

He shrugged. "Difference of views." Changing the subject he asked:

"Do you really still feel as you did, even after living all this time up at Milota?"

"More, I think. I look at the people there, and I remember what happened down here. I can still see that policeman's horror as he went down, I can still hear him scream as those savages killed him with their bare hands. It's not the kind of thing one forgets. It means that there's something dreadfully, tragically wrong underneath. You can't build up a decent world with that kind of beastliness in the foundations."

"'Savages' isn't very kind to my friends the Greens."

"I know, but it's true. They were savages at that moment. It's no good pretending they weren't. The thing to do is to change the system which makes them savages."

"So easy to say."

"Yes. I begin to understand what you were telling me more now. But it can be done. If it could be done on Earth, and it was, it can most certainly be done on Venus."

"It will be—one day."

She looked at him, wondering at his tone.

"You told me you were a revolutionary."

"I am, but I am not a firebrand. You don't know these people yet. Still at the back of your mind you feel you have only to say loudly enough 'Unite and this World is Yours' for them to perceive its truth. I know that that is not the way of it.

First you've got to make these people *want* to rescue themselves. You talk to a bunch of, say, Greens on the wage rate—which is disgustingly insufficient. And what do you find their greatest interest is? To raise it, you would say. Well, you'd be wrong. Their real pressing anxiety is lest the Reds or the Blacks get more. That's the kind of thing you're up against."

"But if you show them"

"They don't want to be shown, they don't want reason. They're too fond of their discontents. Doesn't that discourage you?"

"Why should you want to discourage me?"

"I don't. But nor do I want to see you run headlong into trouble—dangerous trouble. If you want to go on, do so by all means, but do it with your eyes open. Know what you are handling, and you may light a lamp on the road to freedom: ignore the human factor and you may be fuel for reaction."

Francis and Marion Clouster saw her off together as she left. There was a frown on the woman's face as the car drove off.

"What do you think?" she asked as they went back indoors.

Francis fingered his chin.

"Good stuff, but it's early to judge. Plenty of them came here from Earth feeling just like that. What are they now? Hostesses in the big Milota houses. Crown opinion too strong for them. Still, we shall see, we shall see."

"I hear she's seeing a lot of young David Sherrick."

Francis looked at her in surprise.

"Really, the things you manage to hear, shut away down here."

"That might be interesting, don't you think?"

"It might—and then again it might be just another couple of young marrieds in a new house on Milota."

III.

"THAT girl of yours settling down all right?" inquired Wilfred Baisham, depositing the ash of his cigar with careful delicacy.

"So, so," said Mr. Ward. "Takes time, of course. But she's young. They all have these half-baked, socialistic ideas when they're young, but they grow out of them."

"Half-baked?" inquired Mr. Baisham, with a lift of his eyebrows. "What about the Great Union?"

"Yes, of course. But it can't happen here."

"Comforting theory. All Milota says that. Don't you ever have less comfortable moments when it occurs to you that it might very easily happen here?"

Mr. Ward looked up, startled and uncertain.

"You don't mean that?"

"I decidedly do."

"But our order of society is perfectly stable."

"My good Ward, there never was an order of society yet which did not have to protect itself

against disintegration—not just now and then, but continuously. Any form of society is, after all, a method of training Nature, but Nature never sleeps, and never gives in. Just a little too much of this 'it can't happen here' stuff, and one day—Pouf! And you and I, your mills and my mines—where are we?"

"But I had no idea of this, Baisham, what are we doing about it?"

"Oh, about the same as usual. Just seeing that it doesn't take place."

Mattington Ward reached for another cigar and lit it.

"Confound you, Baisham, for a moment you scared me."

"If your Leonie had her way it would happen here, from what they tell me."

"She's hardly more than a child, you know. It's just these notions she picked up on Earth, she'll forget them. But I must say I see more and more clearly that it was a mistake ever to send her. She wouldn't have had all this readjustment to go through if she'd stayed here."

"You're right. The less contact between us and Earth except in the way of trade, the better."

"Anyway, Leonie's got another interest that's soon going to put paid to all that," said her father. "Dr. Sherrick."

"Young David Sherrick! Well, I'm glad to hear that. Nothing like a little affair of that kind for knocking that sort of nonsense out of their heads."

"I'm hoping it'll be more than an affair."

"Good. Fine young couple. By the way, I hear she goes down Chellan way to see that queer fish Clouster sometimes. See that she goes somewhere else on Wednesday."

"Why?"

"Going to be trouble. Greens and Blacks. Only don't tell anyone I told you."

DR. SHERRICK came down the hospital steps to see a familiar car balanced patiently on its gyroscopes before the entrance. He went up to it.

"Hullo, Leonie. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting to take you for a run I hope. Get in."

He opened the door and slid in beside her. The car tilted slightly and then readjusted itself.

"But I thought you were at the Pan-Venus Club?" he said, as they started.

"I should have been, but they've chucked me out—or at least asked me to resign. Same thing."

David grunted.

"You're not surprised?" she inquired.

"Not much."

They rode for a mile or two in silence.

"What did you say?" he asked. "I mean, to make them chuck you out."

"I told them that they were dabblers. That if they really believed all the stuff they talk about the equality of man it would not be a club just for

Whites, but for all colours—and with equal standing for all members. I said they were trying to square their consciences by talking and not doing—and seemed to be succeeding pretty well, to no one's profit. I asked them to give me one example of one *practical* way in which they had tried to lower the colour hatred. And—oh well, quite a lot more."

"That makes me even less surprised. What did you expect them to do? Cheer?"

"I didn't care. I just wanted to jolt them a bit."

"Well, I gather you did that."

Leonie stopped the car.

"David, they made me so *angry*. Even *they* don't really care how these wretched people go on quarrelling and killing one another in their slums. Does anyone care?"

"Aren't you doing them an injustice? I think if you talked to them separately you'd find they genuinely care, but they're stuck. They don't know what to do."

"If they are, they've been stuck all their lives."

"They've learnt some of the things not to do. For instance, I'm willing to bet that one thing you wanted them to do was to preach to all three coloured peoples that they are the same under their skins?"

"Yes, I did say something like that. In fact, I offered to do it."

"Well, there's quite enough reason for asking you to resign. They know better than that. When will you understand, Leonie, that each of the three colours considers itself superior to the others? A Black man is actually *proud* of being black because he thinks it shows he has none of the nasty characteristics he imputes to the Reds and Greens."

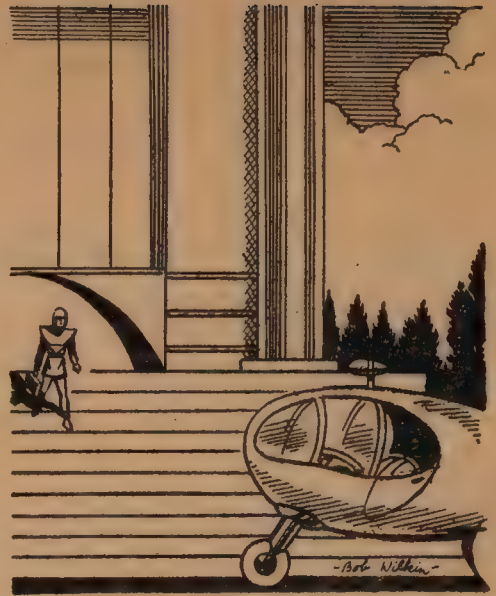
"But . . ."

"Leonie, dear, there isn't any but to that. It's a fact."

"It's also a fact that there's no racial difference. There must be some way of telling them that."

"TELLING, but not convincing. Listen, Leonie, I'll tell you a story. I had a friend called Dick. We went through all our medical training together and qualified about the same time. Both of us felt, knew in our hearts, that this is a rotten system and that something ought to be done to clear it up. He, I suppose, felt more badly about it than I did, anyway, saw it more simply—he was more like you, and I was more like your Pan-Venus people.

"After we passed out he went and set up a practice among the Reds in Barro. He wasn't popular, the practice began to fall off the moment he took it over, but he was a damned good man at his job, so he managed to keep going although they didn't like him. And he knew well enough *why* they didn't like him—it was because they knew that he refused to agree with them when they ran down Greens and Blacks. But he thought he could get over that. His idea was that if he went on doctoring and doing the



best he could for them they'd gradually come round to paying some attention to what he said.

"My own belief is that they wouldn't. The furthest they would have gone was to admit that he knew his particular job, but was quite obviously crazy in certain directions, notably on the racial question. Patience would have taken them that far, but unfortunately he hadn't much gift of patience. Things went too slowly for him and he decided to speed them up.

"He did it at a public health meeting. The hall was packed with Reds, and what must Dick do but get up and tell them that not only were they every bit as good as the Whites, which they didn't mind, but that the Greens and Blacks were every bit as good as the Whites, too. It was brave, but it was madness. They went for him like tigers, of course."

"What happened?" Leonie asked.

David Sherrick looked at his hands, avoiding her eyes.

"Nobody ever told the exact details, but the next day most of his clothing was found at the foot of a tree on the edge of the swamp forest. It was ripped to pieces and bloodstained. There were some ropes loosely tied round the tree, marks which showed that saurians had been there—and a few human bones, that was all . . ."

Neither spoke for a few minutes. It was David who went on.

"There have been other things like that. Everyone has heard of them, can you blame the Pan-Venus people for being careful? And if the Reds hadn't dealt with Dick the Whites would have."

"The Whites?"

"Well, the Government—it's the same thing. He'd be in prison now for incitement to break the peace, subversive activities or something of the kind.

"You see, Leonie, I've already lost one friend, my best friend, through this and I've no wish to see what happened to Dick Clouster happen to you."

Leonie was brought up short by the name.

"Clouster? Was he related to Francis Clouster who lives down in Chellan?"

"Yes, he was his son, only son."

LEONIE opened her mouth to speak, and then thought better of it. There was a pause which she broke.

"But, David, something must be done. You think that, don't you?"

"I probably think it even more strongly than you do, Leonie. As a doctor I come into contact with its actual results. In hospital we're never without cases who've been beaten up for no reason but their colour. And when there's a big row we're rushed off our feet with the wounded. It's stupid and cruel, it causes endless suffering—you know how easily any cut gets infected here—it wastes our time when we might be doing really important work. God knows there are plenty of fevers to be tackled yet. Of course, something must be done, and we ought to do it. Damn it, it was the doctors who made it possible to colonise Venus at all by conquering rheumatism. But for that no one could have stood this climate, now it's up to us to make it worth living in. But how? I wouldn't mind using my life on it, but I'm hanged if I'm going to waste my life on it as Dick did. Listen, I'll tell you another story.

"Three days ago they brought a Green woman in. She was dreadfully hurt. Heaven knows why she was still alive, but she was. There was nothing we could do for her but give her some dope. And I'll tell you why it happened. You know, don't you, that it's about the equivalent of suicide for any woman on Venus to have a child anywhere but in a hospital?"

"Streptococcus infection?"

"Exactly. But sometimes by accident it does happen. Well, it had happened to this woman. When her husband saw that the baby was white, he went crazy. He killed the child, went for his wife with a knife and then ran out into the street and killed the first White he saw, just to show what he thought of us."

"Because the baby was white? What would he have done if it had been red?" said Leonie.

David looked at her oddly.

"It . . ." he began, and then checked himself. "And that's not an isolated instance by any means. It's a thing which is deliberately built up in their schools and their homes."

"Deliberately."

"I said deliberately."

Leonie frowned.

"I don't think I understand. Isn't it mostly a prejudice handed on in the families?"

"It is. But who stands to gain from that prejudice? Who rules and owns Venus?"

"The Whites, I suppose."

"Exactly. The people living in luxury on Milota—and all the Milotas in the other cities. Don't you see? It's an old, old game. Make the people distrust one another, keep them at loggerheads, prevent them from uniting for their rights and you can rule. Let them combine and you're sunk. Your precious societies on Milota like to patronise, but they don't want Reds, Greens and Blacks to combine, that'd be the end of the Whites' rule—and they know it."

LEONIE was silent, trying to grasp this new aspect. Hitherto she had believed at the back of her mind that her friends on Milota were merely apathetic and selfish, that they recognised the shamefulfulness of affairs but did not bother to bestir themselves to mend it. It required reorientation to see them as deliberate partisans. She found it difficult. And yet, why not? Wars on Earth had been engineered and countless people slaughtered for ends no more noble—indeed there were some who claimed that that was almost invariably the motive. But—her own father and his friends intentionally keeping the coloured peoples at enmity for their own profit? That was more than she could take in. Her feelings rejected it in spite of her reason.

"I can't believe it."

"Haven't they tried to laugh you out of it, argue you out of it? Have they lost any opportunity of impressing on you that liberty, equality and fraternity may work on Earth, but it won't do so here? Have they given you any encouragement whatever?"

Leonie turned and gazed miserably at him. She shook her head. It was perfectly true, every word. They had been tolerant sometimes as one might to a child, never more than that. She began to see it now. Milota and its rule would be swept away in a moment if the people rose and took their rights. David was watching her intently. He saw her take the shock, waver a moment in divided loyalties, then a hardening light in her eyes, a firmer line to her lips.

"There is," she said slowly. "There is a kind of absolute right. The right of any human being to freedom and equality of opportunity. And there is an absolute wrong; to enslave, and to incite to murder."

David Sherrick sighed.

"I was afraid of that. The other way would have been so much easier for you, Leonie, dear. And yet I'm glad, so glad. You're one of the real people, Leonie."

He looked at her seriously. Her eyes dropped and she turned her head away.

"No, no, darling, don't cry," he said.

She clung to him for a few moments.

"David. I'm sorry. I—I feel as if I had lost something—something very precious."

"You have, dear, but that had to be. You had come to the point where something had to be lost—either your illusions, or your principles."

There was a silence, neither spoke for some minutes. Then David slipped his arm away from her. He looked straight before him. His tone was hard as he spoke.

"Leonie, dear, I am going to shock you, I'm afraid. But I must. I am going to put myself in your hands because I trust you, because I know that you are the most genuine person I have ever met. And because I love you for it, Leonie, I am going to break a solemn oath . . ."

"David . . ."

"I am, because it is an oath which should never have been asked or given, there should have been no need for it." For one last moment he hesitated on the brink, then he plunged.

"You asked what would have happened if the Green woman's baby had been red."

"Yes."

"Well, it couldn't have been. That's all."

"I don't understand. If it could be white. . ."

"Leonie, all the babies are white. Red, Black, Green women: they all have white babies. Don't you see?"

NOBODY knew how nor quite when it had begun, David told her. It must have been back in the early days of colonisation when men were struggling for a foothold on Venus. In those days life had been a horribly uncertain business. Exploration had been dangerous, uncounted hundreds of men had gone out from the settlements so laboriously established and had never returned. The saurians had not learned from experience to avoid the high land and keep to the water and the marshes. Scientific acclimatisation had not yet been developed, so that the heat and humidity were a burden to everyone. The mortality rate was appalling. Fevers, infections in wounds, and, worst of all, rheumatic afflictions carried men and women off in such numbers that at one time the idea of permanent colonisation was all but abandoned.

They were times of chaos and uncertainty when even the least adventurous had no more than a slipper hold on life. It was then that someone's ingenuity managed to establish it. It could never have been done on Earth, but on Venus where a woman must give birth to her child in the hospital or face certain death, it was somehow accomplished.

But if the how and when were uncertain, the why was plain. Colonisation began away back in the heyday of international finance in the days before the Great Union when groups of interests lived comfortably out of the profits which came from pitting one section of the Earth's population against another. It was a technique developed over centuries, seldom

failing, and yet unperceived for generations by the mind of the common man. The days of profit from victory of one's own side had long gone by. To the big interest it mattered little any longer which side won; their concern now was two-fold, to sift wealth out of the waste of war, and to see that neither side emerged from a conflict dangerously strong. They were upheld, as it were, by a balance of forces ingeniously held in equilibrium; in peace the scales tilted slowly back and forth, in war there was a hurried throwing of weights into this pan and then that to prevent either coming down with a crashing victory. It was good while it lasted, and it had lasted a long time, but of late there had been signs that the central pivot was about to crack as the movements which were to culminate in the Great Union gathered force.

It was a system which had been developed out of the natural conditions of Earth and it had suited the select dwellers in Earth's penthouses very well indeed, but now they saw the foreshadow of a world in which it would no longer work.

From what Machiavellian mind there first crawled the idea that it was possible to improve on Nature even in this respect is unknown; its owner remains unsung, unglorified. But it is clear what he saw. Here was a new world. Into it were beginning to flow colonists from the old. They were of different nationalities, but that was beginning to matter less than it did. They were nearly all of the white race. For the most part they were tough customers more occupied with the business of living than learning; individualists, too, anxious to get on rather than combine, anxious to be lent money to buy machinery and to be put into other men's debt. That was satisfactory. But one day the ideas which were taking hold on Earth would be carried across space and begin to spread on Venus. There would be no racial bar to hold them back and little language difficulty; before long the people would rise as one. They would refuse to be exploited, to be chained down by heavy interest, to put up with low wages and poor conditions—and then the dominant moneyed class would dominate no more.

"They must not unite," said the Machiavellian mind. "They must be divided amongst themselves. And what is the greatest factor of disunion on Earth? It is race. But Nature has not seen fit to create different races of men upon Venus. Very well, then, *we will*."

MOST sedulously unwritten is the history of early Venusian development. How did they set about the creation of coloured races? Did they steal children and adopt orphans? Did they distraint upon children for non-payment of debts? Did they bully or bribe? Did they drive men and women into actual slavery? Did they set up colonies in remote places? No one knows. No one is ever likely to know, for it was a secret well kept and now deep buried.

It is only known that strange men and women, Green, Magenta-Red and Black, began to be seen about. According to rumour they were the offspring of Whites and natives to be found in some secluded parts of Venus. No one had seen these natives, but each had a friend who had. It seemed natural, if scarcely commendable.

Simultaneously began a reduction in the quota of immigration from Earth. The supply of new White blood decreased, but the numbers of coloured people appeared to increase. Whites began to marry Green, Red or Black partners, and always the child was the colour of its coloured parent. It was odd. There was considerable talk about genes, but to little purpose. It seemed that the terrestrial laws and heredity did not hold on Venus.

Later the immigration laws were relaxed to some extent and careful attention paid to the balance of the sexes. It began to become unc customary to intermarry with the colours. Later still it became not only illegal, but unethical.

By that time, David explained, the four "races" were firmly established.

"But how was it ever allowed to happen?" Leonie wanted to know. "There must have been people who knew, why didn't the doctors stop it?"

"For a very simple reason. Who do you think owned and ran the hospitals? A man could only be a doctor if he kept in with the authorities—and the same is true now. All doctors and hospital attendants are, as you may have noticed, of the White, the ruling, class. Oddly enough they despise the coloured for being coloured even though they are responsible for it. Even I, if I am honest with myself, do not feel that I am quite the same as a Red or a Green. That's the pressure of mass opinion, of course; against all I know, and against all reason it is there. That's where the truly diabolical nature of the thing lies. Once it was under weigh it had to go on. And what could or can we doctors do? Protest and be struck off the register or perhaps imprisoned for subversive activities? Protest that we will not give a Green woman the Green baby she expects? We cannot even protest that the colouration does any physical harm. It doesn't."

"Except to bring bloodshed and murder."

"That's not supposed to be in the doctor's province."

"But suppose you united and called a strike. Refused to do it any more."

"Well, to begin with, one would probably disappear or be struck off in the attempt to get unity. But even apart from that this thing has gone on so long now that I don't think you would get unity at all. You see, there's another side to it, too.

"Try to imagine yourself a Red woman. You have always been Red, so have your family, your friends, your schoolmates. You have married a Red man. All your life you have expected and looked forward to have a Red baby. What is going to

happen if someone suddenly shows you a White baby after it is all over and says: 'This is yours'? You are going to disbelieve it, of course. It is somebody else's baby, not yours. No amount of argument is going to kill the doubt in your mind. And what about your husband? He, too, has expected a Red baby. How is he going to take a White one—and what is he going to think? I told you what happened to a Green woman with a White baby. Even if you, a Red woman, were told it all as I have told it to you now and if you did believe it, you would still demand your Red baby, you would be ashamed, afraid to face your world with a White one.

"God, don't you see what we've done? We've built a lie too colossal to be disbelieved."

"And it must go on and on?"

"As long as each colour thinks itself the superior of the others—and the Government sees that it does—it must go on. There's only one way that I can see in which it might be stopped and that's by the elimination of the streptococci and other infections. That would make it safe for women to have babies in their own homes, and the whole thing would come down with a run. But until then . . ."

LEONIE sat silent, a slight frown on her forehead, her eyes staring unseeing into the misty distance.

"How is it done, Dick, this colouring?"

"Oh, that's not very difficult. After the baby has been washed it is taken along to a special room. There it is smeared all over with a particular grease. Depending on the colour of its mother there is a colouring agent, Red, Green or Black latent in the grease. It is then placed under a projector which looks something like an X-ray tube, and is turned very carefully so that every inch of its body comes under the direct rays. They are short waves and carry the colour from the grease. They penetrate the skin and beyond, and their action is rather that of burning the special colouring agent right into and through the skin at low temperature. It sounds a little painful put that way, but actually it isn't. The child feels nothing whatever. After that it is ready to be washed again and taken back to its mother. The whole thing takes less than five minutes."

"And the colour is there for the rest of its life?"

"Yes. Though as I expect you've noticed, the colouring is rather more vivid in children than in adults."

"David. I can hardly believe it even now. All these Red, Green and Black men and women. . .?"

"Every one of them, Leonie!"

"Was there ever a lie so big?" Leonie turned suddenly and grasped his arm.

"David," she said, desperately, "David, this musn't, this shan't go on. It's got to be broken. Somehow there must be a way of breaking it. We've got to find it."

IV

"HULLO, Reynick. Come along in. Have a drink."

The Chief of the Tallor Police, secret and uniformed branches, did as he was bid. He sat down in a comfortable chair half-facing his host and raised his glass.

"Always a harbinger of trouble," said Mr. Wilfred Baisham, amiably. "What is it now?"

Reynick sipped at his drink.

"It's not so much a matter of what is now," he said, "more a case of what may be soon. It's really guidance for the future I'm after. I don't think anything like this has ever shown up before."

"All right, no need to beat about. Guidance on what?"

"On Mr. Ward's daughter."

"What about her?"

"Subversive activities."

"Oh, that. They're all like that, they grow out of it. Most of 'em get interested in some young man and forget about it. She must soon see that Earth ideas aren't wanted here."

"This one seems to be growing into it."

"Give her time."

"I'm inclined to think it's more serious. In the last few months I've been hearing more and more about her. She's been working around a lot among the coloured women, telling them they're as good as the Whites, and she seems to have a way with her for I'm told they've been listening a bit." He paused to light a cigar and went on:

"Mind you, I don't say they take her very seriously, and she's certainly not got anything that could be called a following. All the same, one can't pretend that that kind of thing is good. It might conceivably catch on a bit if there were to be a wave of unrest. Another thing, anybody else who feels like that—and there are quite a few of them—and sees her getting away with it feels encouraged to have a shot at it, too. To my mind it's the kind of thing that it pays to nip right in the bud."

"Well, what am I supposed to do about it? After all, nipping things is your job," Mr. Baisham pointed out.

"Certainly, and if it had been anyone else I'd have done it by now. But this isn't so easy. After all, Mr. Ward's daughter. . . ."

"Yes, I see that."

"And it's not only that. If we touch her, either taking her up in court, or—er—less officially, we advertise the whole thing and make it much more important. Of course, we could tip off the news strips to keep it quiet, but these things get round. Besides, what's old man Ward going to say—and do? I can't see him taking it quietly."

"It's darned awkward. She's not like the usual run of Milota charity women—they'll take a hint, she won't."

Mr. Baisham leant forward and poured himself another drink.

"What you're really getting at, Reynick, is that you want me to have a go at Ward. Show him the error of his daughter's ways?"

"Well, he would take it better from you than from me."

"All right. I'll try if you like. But to be candid, I don't hold out much hope. It'll worry him a bit, but it's done that already. Between you and me, Reynick, the girl just doesn't pay any attention to him now. Ungrateful little bit, after all he's done for her and spent on her. Poor chap takes it hard. He's been looking forward to having her home for years now and she treats him like the furniture. However, as I said, I'll mention it. But if I were you I'd think up a second line."

"Such as?"

"Well, if I were in your place I'd let her go on, but keep a careful eye on her. You might even let it be known that you're keeping an eye on her. Meanwhile, you could let a little rumour circulate that she's trying to rouse trouble between, say, the Greens and the Blacks. That may make her draw in a bit, I hope it does. But if she goes on, sometime or other she'll overstep the mark, then your men will have to see to it that she disappears. If it's done neatly everybody will think it's either the Greens or the Blacks who did it—and they can fight that out among themselves. I'd hate you to have to do it for her father's sake as well as her own, she's a live girl and she's got pluck, but all the same, if she shows signs of getting dangerous, she's got to be stopped, no matter who she is."

"Palliam?" asked Reynick.

Wilfred Baisham frowned. Palliam, the penal island, the place of lifelong sentences never remitted. For the daughter of a good friend. It was not nice. But he shook his head regretfully.

"I'm afraid so. There's nowhere else as safe. But try everything else first."

THERE was a frown on Leonie's face as she shut the front door of a small Chellan house behind her and turned to walk to the spot where she had left her car in the main road. The street she must traverse to reach it was narrow and badly lit, one into which few, if any, of the other dwellers on Milota would have ventured alone by night. But Leonie had little nervousness of Chellan now. Francis Clouster had, she fancied, passed a word around on her behalf, but, more important, she had become a known figure there. It was understood by the Greens that though her ideas might be odd, she meant well.

Meant well. . . . There lay the reason for her frown. That was their faintly damning opinion of her. Try as she would, shape her tactics as she might, she seemed unable to make progress. David had convinced her that her ambition to shout the

truth about themselves to the coloured peoples would mean not only danger to herself, but disaster to her cause. They would not be told, realisation if it could come at all must not be thrust upon them so that they could resist it; it must come or appear to come from inside themselves. By hints, by becoming aware of discrepancies, by linking this and that together they must be led on to question their own state, to ponder its anomalies and arrive at the answer for themselves. She understood now that her part, if it were to be of use at all, must be played with subtlety and the utmost caution against a careless word. She must prompt ever so gently, undetectably. Urge and deflect without arousing a breath of suspicion that she was directing.

For months now she had been pursuing this course. Listening sympathetically to gain confidence, speaking little, dropping every now and then a word which should have struck a spark of inquisitive interest, but never seemed to. As far as she could see the months had been utterly wasted. There had been no progress; no Green, Red or Black had taken even the first step which might lead to his one day questioning his Greenness, Redness or Blackness. This evening had been typical of the lack of response. To a party of Green women she had in the natural course of conversation remarked how it had at first surprised her to find that Greens naturally had pink finger nails and toe nails just like her own. She had even been a little obvious, but no one had been much interested or wanted to compare theirs with hers. One could only hope as one had hoped so many times that the suggestion would lie dormant to arise later. Meanwhile she must continue to watch a tongue that was for ever threatening to run way in its impatience.

A trifle disturbing, too, was the realisation that if her hints failed to register in the desired quarter, they were getting home somewhere else, with the result that she herself became the recipient of hints referring for the most part to the unpleasant consequences encountered by persons who tried to stir up trouble. She was uncertain at first what value to put upon them, but their frequent recurrence from the most unexpected sources had lately begun to worry her more than a little. It was understandable that while her eyes were on the ground, steering her round the worst mud patches, her mind should be preoccupied.

SHE was without suspicion as she passed the entrance of a dark alley; taken completely by surprise when a hand from behind clapped down over her mouth and an arm simultaneously whipped round her, fastening her own arms to her sides.

She lashed backward with a heel, bringing a grunt from the man behind her, but no slackening of his grip. A second man, no more than a dark figure in the gloom, dodged forward to catch her ankles and lift her feet from the ground. Without a word

the two men turned to carry her back up the alley whence they had come. For a hundred yards or more they stumbled and slid along the uneven paving. Blocking the other end where the alley gave on to a wider road, she could see the shape of a car ready balanced on its two wheels. As they drew closer she could distinguish the faint humming of its gyroscopes. She struggled ineffectively. Held as she was she could do little but bend her knees and kick out again in an attempt to loosen the men's holds. It made them stumble a bit, and the man in front swore in a grumble, but practical result there was none.

They came close beside the car. The man who held her feet released his hold with one hand and reached for the door handle. At that moment there was a thud behind her. The hand dropped from her mouth and the arm round her relaxed. She felt herself falling. Simultaneously the man in front looked round. She had a vision of an arm which held something in its hand striking down at his head. He dropped without a murmur. A groping hand found her own arm, and pulled her to her feet.

"Quick and be quiet," breathed an urgent voice.

She was being dragged at a helter-skelter stumbling run back along the alley. Halfway down they swung into another passage-way even darker, and then round corners one after another until all sense of direction was gone, and she felt like a bewildered child in a nightmare; staggering, slipping, panting, but dragged willy-nilly onwards through an endless dark labyrinth.

There came a pause at last. She leant against a wall, gasping for breath. Her companion was a black shadow in the darkness. She could hear him fumbling in his pockets. She had only one desire; to get back to her car and drive furiously home.

"My car. . . ." she began.

"Damn your car. It's your life you want to save," said a low voice, curtly.

He ceased to fumble. There was a sound of a key in a lock. A hand urged her forward into absolute blackness. The door shut behind them. He took her wrist again, leading her cautiously forward for a dozen yards or more. Then once more he stopped.

"Lie down here," he said. "I don't suppose anyone will come, but if they do, pull the stuff right over you and don't make a sound. Don't breathe. I'm going now to see what's happened. I'll be back in an hour or so."

Bending over, Leonie felt a pile of coarse material like jute under her hand. She heard his footsteps moving away. By the door they paused.

"If you put any value on your life," his voice came softly, "you'll stay here, and be safe."

Leonie found her voice shaky and a little meek.

"I'll stay," she said into the darkness.

She dare not strike a light to look at her watch. If it was only an hour he was away, it was the longest hour of her life, and all though it she lay on the pile of sacking with ears strained for the faintest sound. The tone of urgency in his voice had done more to rouse her apprehensions than the actual events. At the long delayed sound of the lock she started up, sitting; one hand ready to drag the musty cloth over herself.

"It's all right," said the same voice.

She let out her held breath, and put a hand to her thumping heart. He came closer.

"Come along."

HE led the way in the dark along passages, through doors and finally down a flight of steps. At the bottom he closed the last door and turned on the light. Leonie blinked and then opened her eyes to find herself facing a man whose skin was green as the patina on copper. There was something faintly familiar about him, but it was always difficult to recognise people of the colours, one had to learn to remember faces by form alone without the help of complexions.

"Who are you?" she said.

"Never mind about that. The important point at the moment is that you, Miss Ward, are in a nasty spot."

"Why?"

"I should have thought you could guess that yourself. Weren't you warned that you were heading for trouble?"

"I suppose I was, but . . ."

"And who do you suppose those men were who grabbed you?"

"I've no idea. It was dark, Greens? I'd just been talking to some Green women."

"You've talked to too many people. Those two were secret police."

"Secret police, why I . . ."

"Yes, secret. It would have been a nice little secret business altogether. Total and inexplicable disappearance of prominent Milota citizen's daughter."

There was a pause. Leonie's gaze wandered round the room. It had the appearance of a rough workshop. There was a bench on one side, a metal surfaced table on the other, racks of tools hung on the walls, a little pile of chips and shavings covered the floor. The only breaks in the four walls were a small ventilator and the door through which they had entered. A cellar, she supposed, taking the place in with only half her mind.

"What would have happened?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It means you're officially listed as dangerous. You're not to be allowed to go about trying to spread disaffection on Venus. They daren't send you to Earth for they won't want your views spread there. I should say it means either imprisonment for life

on Palliam or some such place—or perhaps something more drastic."

Leonie looked at him hard. There was no doubt he meant what he said.

"But without hearing—without trial?" she said, incredulously.

"Do you think they want to give you the chance to announce your views in public?"

"Then perhaps I have to thank you for my life?"

"We might see about that later on. The important thing just now is for you to disappear—only in a different way." He laid on the bench a bag which he had been carrying slung from one shoulder. Out of it he pulled a large jar and a bundle of clothes and a dark bottle. He took up the jar and started to loosen the lid.

"The White Miss Ward has got to vanish," he said. "You'll have to become a Green."

Leonie looked up at him, horror-stricken.

"Me, a Green woman. No, oh, no. I can't, I can't look like them."

"And why not?" inquired the Green man, coldly.

"To be a Green the rest of my life, never to see myself as I really am. I couldn't."

"Of course not. There's a medium which will get this stuff off once you're safely away from here and out of reach."

"Oh, I see. How silly of me. For a moment I thought you meant I must be made Green like they make the babies."

The Green man stared at her. Slowly he put down the jar on the bench. His eyes never left hers.

"Who told you that?" he demanded.

"A—er—I—I must have heard it somewhere."

"It's scarcely the kind of thing one hears by accident. Now I begin to understand why they wanted you so much. Tell me, have you been spreading this about? No, of course you haven't or you wouldn't be here now. But just what were you up to?"

"I wanted to make them find it out for themselves."

Surprisingly he laughed.

"What a hope. A few hints and suggestions, I suppose. Did you think those were going to get through the mass of suggestion carefully built up all their lives. Do you know anything of crowd psychology?"

"I thought they might. There didn't seem any other way. And, anyway, it doesn't seem to surprise you. Who are you?"

"Never mind about that now. We must get on. You see the stuff in this jar." He held it so that she was able to make out a dark green substance within. "You must put this on. For a week at least it will make you indistinguishable from any other Green. In the bottle there's dye for your hair. Now get your clothes off, and go to it."

"But. . ."

"For God's sake. Is this a time for fooling about the proprieties?"

"All right," said Leonie, meekly.

He gathered up her clothes as she shed them and put them into the bag.

"Now put the green stuff on. Do it properly, make yourself a thorough Green woman—we don't want any silly accidents. Give it ten minutes or so to take, and then wash the rest off. There's a tap in the corner. Maybe you'd better do your hair first—and don't forget your eyebrows and eyelashes. Then get dressed in these things," he pointed to the bundle of clothes he had brought, "and wait until I come back."

The door slammed and he was gone, taking her clothes with him.

Leonie set about the business of changing her "race."

HE was gone over two hours. When he returned he submitted her to a critical survey. Leonie withstood it awkwardly, conscious of the ill-fitting cheap clothes she wore.

"Well?" she said, after his eye had taken her in from top to toe.

"You'll do. Except for that watch. No Green woman could afford a watch like that. Better give it to me."

She handed it over without protest and he slipped it in his pocket.

"I might have done better with a mirror," she observed.

"I doubt it. You'd most likely have quit altogether."

Leonie gazed at her fantastically green arm, wondered what her face was like, and thought he was probably right.

"And now?" she asked.

"And now we are going out. You are a Green woman in the Green quarter—your home, don't forget. Miss Leonie Ward is dead—murdered to put it crudely. Somebody who didn't like her took her out to the marshes and fed her to the saurians. Only a few bloodstained rags of her clothing to show what happened. All most regrettable and upsetting, but rather the kind of thing you might expect to happen to a girl who would mix with the coloured peoples."

Leonie paused at the door. Something clicked in her memory—"Only a few bloodstained . . ."

"Now I know who you are. You're Dick Clouster, who's supposed to be dead. I saw you at your father's house once."

"You did. And in one of my less cautious moments. It worried me for a bit afterwards."

"And you're not a real Green after all."

"Who is? Come along now, we must be moving."



V

MR. WILFRED Baisham spoke into the telephone.

"My dear friend. They've only just told me. What a ghastly thing to have happened. So young, such a lovely girl with all her life before her. An appalling tragedy."

He listened to a few sentences in Mattington Ward's attenuated voice before he spoke again.

"I? Well, yes, I have a little influence in the Police Department, I suppose, but I shan't need to use it. This thing's made their blood boil. It's an outrage which Tallor is never going to forget. They'll get them, you can depend on that, Mattington. They'll be at it night and day until they find the men that did it. Fiends like that have got to be caught, and caught quickly."

He listened a little longer before he said goodbye and rang off. For a moment he sat and looked absent-mindedly at the misty world beyond the window. Then he picked up the telephone again and dialled a number.

"Hullo, Reynick. Anything about the Ward girl yet?"

"—No? Well, it's a bit soon perhaps. By the way, her father and all Milota's quite satisfied the Greens did it. Not a doubt between them. That'll make things quite simple when you do find her."

"—Yes, I'm pretty sure. The whole thing was too convenient. Why choose just the moment when your men had got her?"

"—Yes, I know people have been put out on the marshes before, but it's always been done in hot blood, with a minor or major riot of some kind to carry it through."

"—Of course you have. You didn't expect her to try to get away in her own car, did you? Now look here, when you do find her, I'd go steady."

Don't pounce the moment she's spotted. Lie low a bit. We thought she was on her own, but it's pretty clear now she's not. There may be several under cover. When you make your jump you want to bag the lot if you can. Provided she's here at all, of course. It's not quite at all unlikely that she's been acting as agent for a group outside Tallor altogether, in which case, she's probably in another city already. Have you been able to get a line on how much she really knows?"

"—Oh, you think that, do you? Then she's more dangerous than we fancied. Still, she can't do much now she's on the run. By the way, it might do to keep an eye on that young man. . . . Yes, Dr. David Sherrick. . . . Yes, let me know."

Again Wilfred Baisham sat gazing speculatively out of the window. For a quarter of an hour he was lost in thought before he reached once more for the telephone.

"West Milota Hospital? . . . My name's Baisham, I want to speak to the Director if he's free."

"—Hullo, Dray. I'd like a word confidentially with you, it's rather urgent. Mind if I come round right away? . . . Good, I'll be there in ten minutes."

LEONIE stared long and miserably into the mirror, studying every detail of the face which stared back. A face with a complexion soft as velvet, but green as grass. The lips, after the manner of most Green women, were painted a brilliant red, they matched the small rings in her ears. There was a faint shading of dusky powder on her eyelids which was also a fashion among Green women. When she opened her mouth her teeth gleamed a startling white: she opened it as little as possible. Her dark hair was now shorter and dressed differently from the way it had been when it was fair. Still she could barely believe in its reality. She put a hand up to touch it, to feel that it was her own face—a green hand with finger nails painted red as her lips.

This was herself. This thing in the mirror. This for ever more, if David failed.

She hid her face in her green hands and wept.

It had been inescapable. Two days after the attack in the alley Dick Clouser had come up to the little room he had found for her. He was carrying a black case which he set down carefully on the table.

"I'm afraid I've bad news for you. There's a comb-out going on in Chellan."

"The Police?" she asked, anxiously.

He nodded.

"Do you think they know I'm here?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. It's quite probable someone else. You're not the only White masquerading as a coloured. But that doesn't make it any the less serious."

"But they'll never recognise me like this. I can

stand questions. I've learnt that family history you gave me off by heart. I'm Doris Glandon, my father was. . . ."

"I know, but they've got cute little dodges. I told you there was a medium which gets the green stuff off. Well, a little touch on a pad damped with that, and it's all up. They get real Greens to mingle in the street and touch as many hands with it as possible. Or they put it on handles of doors, anything which a lot of people may touch, and set a watch. I've even known them spray it over a crowd in the hope that somebody will look spotty. The real Greens don't mind. It doesn't matter to them."

"Well," she said with a half apprehension of what was coming.

"I'm sorry, Leonie. It means you'll have to stop playing at being a Green, and really become one."

"No—no!"

"There's no other safe way. I wish there were. If you don't, they'll spot you sooner or later. For all I know they may be starting on a house-to-house test right now."

"But—oh, God, I can't do that. I can't."

"Look, I've brought a projector. It's rough, but it works—I know, because I had to use it on myself. We can get it done in ten minutes."

"And for the rest of my life—oh, no."

"Listen. I had to do it. Do you think I liked it? But if I hadn't I should have been caught half a dozen times before this."

"You're not a woman."

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Won't you realise that it is this or your life. Your life! A live Green woman—or a nice pink and white corpse. You choose."

"Don't."

It had taken him the best part of two hours to ram it home to her, to batter down and demolish her stubborn opposition, until she was left weakly and tearfully consenting.

She scarcely recalled its actual accomplishment. Vague memories of being smeared with something, of being turned this way and that beneath a tube which glared and hummed and gradually obliterated the girl who had been Leonie Ward to put Doris Glandon in her place, and of her mind still feebly protesting while her body consented.

WITHIN twenty-four hours the necessity had been proved, and by a more direct method than she expected. There was a barrier across one of the main streets and a party of Green police at its only gap. There was no going back, everyone was ordered to pass through, to press his or her hand on a damp pad and brush it lightly across a sheet of white paper.

"Why do you take so much trouble with me?" she asked Dick Clouser the following evening. "When I look at this," she held out her green

hand—"I'm not even grateful. I'm not worth your trouble."

"My father and mother tell me differently," he said, "besides, I think you are in love with David. He was one of my best friends, you know."

"Was! He would be now if he knew you were alive. And I *was* in love with him."

"You're not now?"

"I can't let myself be now—like this."

Dick Clouser had made no reply to that. He had sat for some minutes in silence. When he spoke it was to ask:

"It was David who told you about the colouring of the babies, wasn't it?"

She nodded.

"Why?" he asked. "He broke his professional word. He must have had some good reason."

"Because he knew how I felt about this—this slavery of the colours. He knew that I meant to go on working against it though he warned me—he told me what happened to you, or, rather, what he thought happened to you, as a warning. And I would not take that warning."

"Do you wish you had?"

"I don't think I could have done. I should have gone on feeling as I did and it would have shown sooner or later. Anyway, when I didn't, he knew that I should be bound to have to know about the babies sooner or later, so he told me."

"And David himself. How does he see it?"

"He says he's ready to use his life to stop it. But that any course he can see would lead only to his wasting his life without stopping it. And I understand that now," she added, bitterly.

Dick got up and began to pace the room. Her gaze followed him back and forth. Suddenly he turned on her.

"Will you swear this? Swear by everything most sacred to you that is how he really feels?"

"I'd put my life on it."

His eyes held hers, intense and penetrating. He nodded. "I believe you." He sat down again. In a calmer tone he went on. "Then there may be a chance. Now listen, I'm going to tell you something which very few people know.

"Very many years ago an accident happened up at one of the Milota hospitals. By some mistake the child of a white woman there was taken to the colouring room. He emerged Black, indelibly Black.

"It was a disaster for the family. Their only son, and there were reasons why they could expect no more children. The mother nearly went out of her mind, the father was distracted, the child was taken home and hidden away out of sight. The father was an exceedingly rich man. If anything could be done about it, he determined to do it—at any cost. In the face of tremendous Governmental opposition he built a research laboratory, equipped it, financed it and brought experts to work

in it. The prize he offered to the man who could perfect a system of harmless decolouring was fabulous.

"For over ten years he poured money into what appeared to be a hopeless quest, and then, suddenly, it seemed, it was found.

"The boy was treated and emerged a normal White.

"The Government swooped like lightning and seized the machine, but neither the father nor the inventor minded that much: the one had his son; the other, a fortune.

"The fate of the machine hung in the balance a while. A considerable body of officials was for its complete destruction; another body felt that a mistake which could happen once could happen again. In the end six machines were made, again in the face of strong opposition. They were deposited in the charge of the directors of the six largest hospitals on Venus, for use only in the gravest emergencies.

"One of them is in the West Milota Hospital."

"Where David is," murmured Leonie.

"For years," Dick went on, "I've been haunted by the thought of that machine locked uselessly away. I've never seen it, but I've been told about it. It's a projector, not unlike the one which does the staining to look at, but it almost exactly reverses the process. A jelly is applied to the skin, the rays of the projector pass through it and the skin and break down the pigments into their components, and by some ductile effect of the special jelly they are drawn out and held. It may take three or even four applications and treatments to clear every trace of the pigmentation, but it does it.

"Yes, for years I've wondered how one could get hold of that machine. I've been a Green long enough to know some other Greens who would undergo the experiment if I had the machine. But there had to be someone at the other end, someone whom I knew I could trust to risk his life for it."

"David's been there a long time. Couldn't you have. . . ."

"Yes, I know. But he was younger when I knew him. I thought of him more than once, but I could never make up my mind to get into touch with him. You see, one's got to be certain, certain beyond all shadow of doubt. And it must be successful. It's not just our lives, yours, mine and his, that hang on it. It's the fate of all the coloured people. I was afraid to make a move because I'm as sure as I am of anything that at a bungled attempt the Government would fly into a panic and destroy all six machines at once; they'd take no second chance.

"Now, I'm going to risk it at last. I'm going to stake everything on David. I can tell him where it is and how it is protected; the rest will be up to him. If he'll do it,"

"I think he'll do it. I know he will."

"We must get into touch with him. That'll have to be done carefully. Unless they're perfectly satisfied about you they'll be watching him. Probably they will anyway, because he was associated with a subversive person such as you. Yes, he'll have to be warned about that right at the beginning. . . ."

HOPE revived in Leonie, but it was a much tempered hope. There would be so much risk, so many things to go wrong, so much strife to be faced later on. And would the coloured people believe even the evidence of their own eyes? Wouldn't they even then be likely to think that they had been changed by a trick into Whites, rather than see that they had been restored to their natural state? But perhaps that did not matter overmuch. They would learn in time. Success would mean something like civil war, more fighting and bloodshed. Treatment of a few of each colour done secretly would convince their friends and relatives. The desire to be a White, one of the ruling class, would spread like fire. But the power of the Government must be overthrown before they could settle down undisturbed to liberating the thousands, herself among them, from the bondage of their colours.

If David were to fail—well, thousands would never know. But she would. For the rest of her life a green face would look back at her from her mirror.

And David had come. Circuitously and, he believed, unobserved. He had been watched the last few days, he knew that, and he had taken elaborately particular pains to see that his followers were thrown off.

She had been at the meeting place, a mean cottage on the outskirts of Chellan when he had arrived. He had walked into the room, his eyes had rested on her a second remotely, uninterestedly.

She had had to step forward and say:

"David!"

There had been a moment's distaste in his eyes. A fraction of a second before his ear recognised her voice. She saw the realisation come home to him, surprise, concern and something less pleasant than concern passing across his face.

"Leonie! Leonie, darling."

He opened his arms to her. She went to them and they closed round her.

"Leonie, dear."

Everything should have been the same. . . .

Then Dick had come in to talk, advise and explain half through the night. And David had agreed as she had never doubted he would. Between the three of them they had plotted and planned down to the last detail. They had parted tired out, but buoyed up with a new hope. If it could be done at all, Leonie felt, David would do it.

But, oh, that look for a Green woman.

And so, Leonie wept.

VI.

DICK Clouster was on his feet expounding and exhorting. Leonie looked at the faces before him. They reminded her of a crowd listening to the patter of a quack medicine man. Hope, frank disbelief, satirical amusement, they were all there. Occasionally their eyes shifted to the apparatus which David was erecting on a table in the corner, and then came back to the speaker's face. They listened, but without conviction.

There were over thirty of them in the room, men and a few women, all Greens. There had been an argument over that, but Leonie's view that there ought to be representatives of all three colours had been borne down by the two men. For one thing there were few contacts with the Red and Blacks: it would not be easy to approach any and persuade them to come; and if they did come Dick and David were apprehensive of the results. It was notoriously difficult to handle successfully any meeting, even a small one, where the colours were mixed. Finally it was decided to introduce the machine to each group in turn, and to the Greens first because it was simplest for Dick, as a Green, to collect a group of them.

Leonie looked across at David. His face wore a serious intent expression as he bent over his work, assembling, adjusting and connecting. It was a month since the night he had come to Chellan. She had not seen him since then, it had been safer for him to seem to go on as usual and only to communicate with them if it were vitally necessary. During that time he had had to work on his own. To make certain the machine was still kept where Dick said it was; to put out of action the locks and alarms which secured it; to get it away; and finally, to cover every trace of his tampering.

She lifted her hand and looked at its green back. Soon that could be green no more. Once the organisation of the Whites was overthrown and the peril of their police removed, she would be free to put herself under the machine and become white once more.

David turned and beckoned her. She crossed over to help him erect and screw down the plated pillar which would suspend the machine over the table. In a few minutes now there would be a form lying on that table, losing for ever the affliction of its colour. It made the sight of her green hands working close to David's white ones easier to bear.

Dick was coming to his peroration now. Showing his audience what it meant. Not just change of colour for a few individuals, but revolution; the liberation of all the colours. For a moment that sentiment did not seem to appeal. Clearly there was a section which felt that if it could be done it should apply only to themselves, the Greens. How would it be possible to avoid contamination by the vicious Reds and the sordid Blacks if they were indistin-

guishable from other people? Wisely Dick sensed the feeling and dropped that aspect. For some minutes he concentrated on the injustices suffered by the Greens themselves; the contrast between their way of living and that of the Whites on Milota.

Finally he asked:

"Which one of you is going to be the first to regain his birthright colour? I could show you on myself how it can be done, but you might think I had tricked you. I want one of you whose family is known, whose parents and grandparents are known to everyone as Greens. Who?"

There was a pause, a dead silence. Then one of the women moved uncertainly forward. A dozen voices muttered a name, it was evident that she was known. She came slowly down the room breathing a little fast between brilliant red lips, red earrings aswing beside a face gravely beautiful in its lines, non-human in its colour.

Dick looked swiftly round the rest, his expression challenging an objection. There was none. He took her by the hand and led her towards the table.

"Your arm first," he said. "That will be enough proof."

He rolled up her sleeve and began to apply a jelly-like stuff to her hand and forearm. David connected up his apparatus and snapped a switch on and off to assure himself that it was in working order. Leonie stepped back, watching the woman's face, wondering how she felt, and remembering her own experience of the reverse process. Over the whole watching room was drawn a tension that could be felt, as if at long last they had begun to understand what it meant.

Dick put the woman's arm in position beneath the projector.

"You must turn it over, very slowly, when I tell you," he instructed.

She did not seem to hear. She was looking down at it. Long, slim green fingers, beautifully shaped red nails. Leonie, the whole room, felt her hesitate and then finally make up her mind.

Dick stepped back. David put up one hand to steady the projector, his other on the switch.

"And now to smash this lie for ever," he murmured.

The switch clicked in a breathless silence.

For a second nothing moved. Then with a scream of agony the Green woman tore her arm from beneath the projector.

Simultaneously the door across the room cracked and broke inwards.

THE telephone bell rang. Mr. Wilfred Baisham turned over in bed and lifted the receiver.

"Oh, hullo Reynick. I've been expecting to hear from you. What happened? Was I right?"

The Police Chief's voice sounded thin and distant at his ear.

"You were. We had a Green there as an observer.

As it happens I'm glad I took your advice to let it go through. But it was cutting it pretty fine, you know, they actually started the machine working."

"My dear, Reynick, don't be absurd. It *looked* like the machine, I grant you—it was meant to. Well, what happened then?"

"Oh, I see now. That's why you advised taking no action unless absolutely necessary. You might have told me before and saved me a nasty few minutes."

"It seemed best to tell only the essential people. And it's always best to let a thing like this break itself up without outside interference. Have you pulled in those three? They're the only important ones."

"No, we —"

"They went for them, did they, when they found it didn't work? I thought they might."

"No. As a matter of fact they didn't. We were in the next room waiting for a signal from our observer—*he*, incidentally, doesn't believe a word of what Clouster said. He thinks it was going to be some complicated kind of racket and so do the rest of the Greens who were there, at least those who got out do. Well, as I said, we were waiting and wondering and then suddenly there was a God-awful scream from a woman and a riot broke out."

"I thought you said—"

"I did. It wasn't the Greens. It was a gang of Reds. They'd got wind of the business somehow. As they saw it, the Greens had got hold of a dodge for making themselves look like Whites, and the Reds didn't intend to let them have a monopoly—in fact, were out to grab it for themselves. In about three minutes there was a full-sized race riot spreading half over the district."

"Tactically that was handy."

"It was. We appeared only as restorers of the peace. I——By the way, you didn't tip off those Reds, did you?" Reynick sounded suspicious.

"No, I'm afraid that was a subtlety which never occurred to me. What happened to the leaders?"

"Clouster and Sherrick got knifed, both of them—and fifteen or sixteen others, too."

"And Leonie Ward?"

"Lynched—poor kid."

Wilfred Baisham paused.

"Nasty. Was it quick?"

"I think so."

Mr. Baisham considered for a moment.

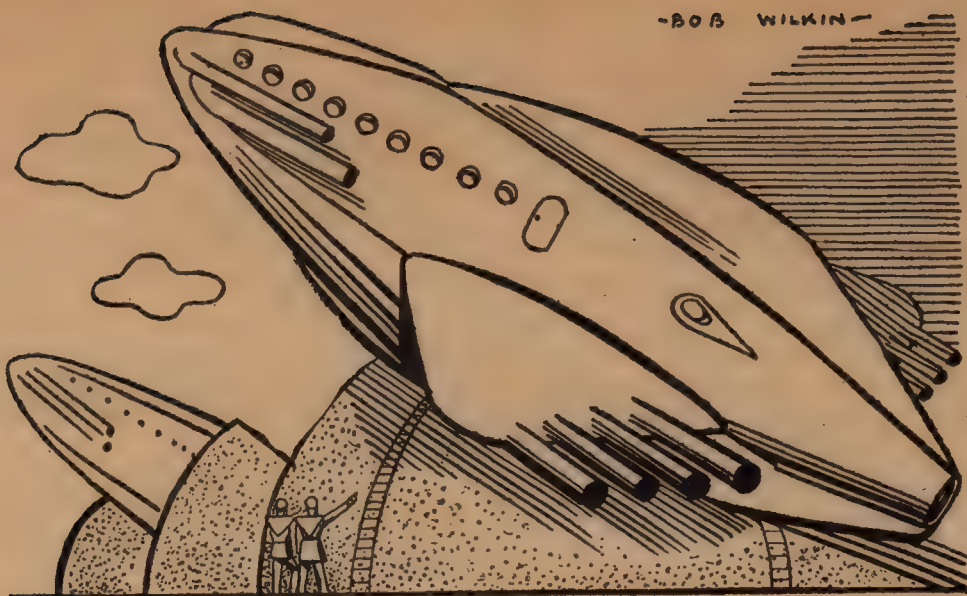
"Perhaps it was better so. A little sooner, that's all. She was too dangerous, that girl. Why must a girl with nerve like that get on the wrong side?"

"To her it was the right side, I suppose."

"I suppose so. All the same, I'm sorry."

And, indeed, it was sorrow Mr. Baisham felt as he put down the receiver. But that did not prevent him sleeping more peacefully than he had slept for some nights past.

THE END



SPACE SHIP 13

By PATRICK S. SELBY

Space ships, like ocean-going liners, will have their courses charted, and the possibilities of a collision will be remote. 13 was unlucky—for some.

"CURSE my luck!" Chuck Ballister signed the acceptance sheet, picked up his astro-navigation kit, and looked resignedly at the man who had managed the Mars Line space ships since the dawn of the century. "Number Thirteen's a death trap—but I suppose we have to take what comes."

He gave a farewell salute, and passed under the archway, shouldering through the throng for a place on the up-going elevator which bore the Mars Line workers towards ground level.

A girl in a very tight one-piece suit turned and gave the tiniest smile as he slightly jostled her with his instrument case.

"Sorry," apologised Chuck. "Haven't I seen you before in First Band Control Room?"

He knew there was no doubt about it. He'd always admired her, which was unusual for him, as his job gave him little time to be a ladies' man. But Celeste attracted him: he glanced down at her shapely form in its sheath-like dress. It was pretty certain that the Convention had had girls like Celeste in mind when they'd fixed the working dress pattern!

"First Band Control?" repeated Celeste, her head tilted back, and her eyes twinkling and tantalising. "You might have noticed me. But I'm on a short holiday now. I'm going to Terminus——" She caught sight of his instrument cases. "You're a Skipper, then? What's your ship?"

"A real terror," said Chuck as they left the elevator for the moving track. "A dreadful number if you've got a bit of the old-timers' temperament. And she's a black history, I believe. Nice commission, isn't it, to drive Ship 13? Or if you want the fancy name, she's the *Rapier*."

"The *Rapier*! Why, I'm booked to travel on that!"

Chuck stared hard for a second, and was conscious of a little thrill of pleasure. Perhaps they could have a few hours together at Terminus.

AS they stepped off the moving track-walk, and stood at the side of the *Rapier's* launching ramp, Chuck looked up at the huge silver streamlined shell with its battery of slightly blackened propulsion tubes set in fin-like formation at the tail, and hoped that

for this trip Ship 13 wasn't going to justify its notorious number. She looked nice enough, he reflected, although she was getting a bit old fashioned; her nose jets weren't of the latest modified type for the automatic landing, but he'd get her to the Terminus ramp easily enough.

"We'll take the lift up to the passenger entrance, and I'll walk through the ship," Chuck told her as he led her towards the forty foot girderwork structure which ran the lift cage up the side of the silver shell. "We'll have to wait a few moments—the lift's just moving off—why, what's the matter? Seen a ghost?"

"No—it's all right. It was just catching a glimpse of those two men who took the lift." The girl shrugged her shoulders, but nevertheless, looked up at him puzzled. "I knew one of them; he'd tried to make up to me a while back, and then disappeared. Guess he just cooled off, and yet—Anyway, here's the lift."

In an hour Chuck was half a unit from Base. He was surprised how well the *Rapier* was handling; the vibration from her tubes was negligible. He moved one of the many coloured power jet levers on the quadrant in front of him, opening the banks of outer-jets. He was keen to get the first distance unit over, when he'd be well away from Base and could open the usual "sealed orders," although there was not likely to be anything much in the envelope: it was just a practice back at Base to avoid a leakage of information to other space ships and any private racketeer, such as had happened when Ship 47 had been diverted off course to Sibus—which was hardly fit for Earth people yet—and had been robbed of some radium cannisters.

Chuck cast a calculating eye over the instrument dials, and checked the gravity meter against the unit clock. They'd made excellent time; the *Rapier* wasn't half such a bad old tub after all. Pity the Skipper's compartment didn't permit him to see the passenger cabin. When they finally got away from the Gravity band, he'd hand over to the Second Skipper, and go back and see how Celeste was faring.

He looked out of the moulded window, and, as usual, felt a sense of wonder at seeing the Earth like a globe below. It would get smaller and smaller, until the shape of the continents was lost, and then the globe itself disappeared. That part of any space journey was the worst; it was just a question of waiting. One day, speeds would be raised and the journey to Mars might be accomplished in half the time, especially if the pull of the recently discovered Sibus could be utilised in some way.

HE checked the instruments once again, and signalled to Slim, his co-pilot.

"We're just one unit out, and dead on course. Take over while I read the route instructions."

He got out of his driving chair, and went to the

swivel seat at the large chart table. He took an almost wistful look at the compartment door behind the seat; it led, by way of a narrow cat-walk past the liquid fuel cylinders, to the small passenger saloon. Then he gave a shrug, and slit open the official envelope.

"Oh, no you don't! Hand that envelope over, brother!"

Chuck spun round. The cabin door had opened silently, and a powerfully built man with a sinister looking scar across his right eyebrow stood holding a deadly radium gun level with Chuck's heart.

"Get out of here!" tried Chuck experimentally, and got slowly to his feet. Slim, away up at the controls, hadn't noticed anything wrong, not that he'd be much help. "And put that gun away—any accident here might send the ship to dust!"

"I'll do the worrying about accidents," growled the man with the scar. "You worry about doing what I tell you; they don't call me 'Kleiner the Killer' for nothin'. Now, gimme that envelope." He held out his huge fist, and his dark, evil little eyes glittered. "Come on, now!"

With a shrug Chuck handed over the envelope. Kleiner snatched at it, and stood aside, allowing the door to be pushed open by a small, red-faced man with hard eyes and a brutal mouth.

"Keep the other driver going, Jorger: I'll look after this one. I've got the dope." He waved the snub-nosed gun, which was capable of searing death, and motioned Chuck to leave the cabin for the cat-walk.

"What's the game, Kleiner? I seem to have a hunch you were connected with that little Ship 47 job—"

"Cut the gab, or I'll lose my temper. There's a store compartment up there. Get up that ladder, brother, and don't come funny. Keep any smooth talk for the dames—but not Celeste."

Chuck had hardly left the last rung of the metal ladder before he was given a violent shove in the back, which sent him sprawling into the small cabin, and before he could recover, the door slammed shut and the bolt shot home.

"Just safe and sound like some scientist's rat in its cage," said Chuck bitterly, as he sat on the low fitted bunk. What game was Kleiner up to? And why had he mentioned Celeste? The thought rang a bell faintly in his mind. Hadn't she said something—Why, of course! The men in the lift!

He clenched his fist with annoyance. Why hadn't he questioned Celeste about the man! It might have put him on to something. Kleiner's name meant nothing to him, but there had been some whisper about this scar-faced giant who was pirating his way about the space routes. And Celeste was a Band Control girl with a knowledge of Astral Line numbers which formed the vital radar beam paths for navigation.

HE got up, and walked round the small room, hoping to strike upon something which might aid his escape. The furniture consisted of merely a low, fitted table, and the bunk; the place was illuminated by a cold light strip running round the panels of the trans-plastex ceiling. He gazed upwards for a second, and noticed the runs of piping which ran along one side of the wall. He went closer and examined the red-painted cut-off valves for cylinder installation dotted here and there along their length.

"Perhaps here, if I could only hit on it, is a solution," he told himself. "Otherwise, I've got a hunch we're in for a tragedy."

He went back to the bunk, sat down on its cushioned edge, and tried to gather together all he knew about the energy system of Ship 13. A constant fuel supply from the boosters was vital until such time as the jets could be gradually shut down and the ship, right outside gravitational pull, would be governed by the Inertia Units. If the jets were not operating correctly on the shut down, there would be a danger on the Terminus end when the jets had to be opened up again. Any sign of jet trouble would call for instant investigation by Kleiner, or even Slim.

He crossed to the red-painted cut-off valves and turned one to the closed position. Yes, that was what he had hoped for; the steady note from the banks of jets had changed. How long would it be before Kleiner came back—not long, unless he sadly misjudged the racketeer's knowledge of power installations.

In less time than he thought, he was waiting ready to seize any opportunity as the bolt shot back and the door swung open.

"So it's you," he observed lightly, seeing Kleiner, the radium gun well in evidence, come in. "You know, something's happened to the power——?"

"Yes—and you're going to fix it!"

"Me?" answered Chuck blankly. "I'm a driver—not a mechanic."

"But you know what to do?"

"Sure," agreed Chuck easily. Wasn't Kleiner getting a bit rattled; there seemed to be a dampness about his brow. "Sure, I know—but I've never done it—never had to. Decent ships run smooth. This is Ship 13, though, so anything can happen. It looks as though you're in a jam, Kleiner, not knowing the works—and Jorger doesn't look too bright——"

"I'll tell you what I do happen to know," snarled Kleiner. "The new Mars Line luxury ship *The Stellar*, is coming through on Astral Line 408. Celeste's just told me! Ha! That hits you, does it? Well, I'll tell you something else: I've got that dame shut in a safe little hide-out in this old tub, and either you fix the power or unpleasant things happen to that trim doll. I seem to remember someone going out through an escape trap once——"

"You swine, Kleiner! I'll get you before we're through!"

The racketeer gave an evil chuckle.

"I'll tell you a bit more. You were briefed to travel up on Astral Line 500, and those orders I took off you merely confirmed it. But I don't keep technicians planted in the space ship yards for nothing; your meter reads 92 Astral lines wrong. So, brother, you're travelling up Line 408——"

"But the *Stellar*——"

"Sure," agreed Kleiner. "That's coming down Line 408. She'll pick up our location on her radar Astral Meter, know something's wrong, and, being and advanced ship, she'll manage to get off the Line and land on Sibus, complete with a very distinguished passenger. Simple, isn't it?"

"All very pretty," sneered Chuck, "but the power of this ship's unbalanced. It'll be too risky to land at Terminus!"

"Oh, no," said Kleiner, with assumed affability. "You and I are going to walk through the ship. You can check up those tubes. If you won't be sensible, then you know what to expect."

"Okay," agreed Chuck. He was not at all sure what he could do to gain mastery of the situation, but obviously he would be better off out in the ship than shut up here. Besides, there was Celeste; he hated to think what devilry she had been subjected to. "Lead on——"

"You first, brother."

THEY went to the little saloon, now empty, and then through the bulkhead door to the huge freight compartments. It was amazing how old-fashioned Ship 13 had become. Things had progressed apace since the days when she'd been a blue-print. Chuck noted the fuel pipes, running down to the fin booster units; the new ships had something quite different. That escape hatch vaguely designed to be used as a jettison port was one of the many things which dated Ship 13.

"Quit gaping around as if you were in a museum!" snarled Kleiner. "Can't you fix this? What about those booster units—are they set right?"

For a moment his hard little eyes were off Chuck, focusing themselves on the large cylinders just either side of the automatic escape hatch. That moment was enough: Chuck's left shot out, knocked the hand holding the radium gun aside, and planted a pile-driving right to Kleiner's jaw! Kleiner gave a grunt, and went back against the door of the hatch, the force of the blow and his unusual weight distorting the panel and operating the catch. There came a sudden rush of air as the pressure in the ship momentarily escaped, a confused closing of spring-loaded doors, and Chuck, dazed and breathless, found himself alone!

"Poor devil!" muttered Chuck shakily, after a stupefied moment. There had been many deaths that way in the old days. Ships had suddenly blown to pieces owing to their internal pressure, and people had been flung into space, where they drifted, shape-

less masses, until they disintegrated and became lost.

Shakily, Chuck made his way back to the saloon. He would have to see what could be done with Jorger, but first he wanted to locate Celeste. He tried one or two cabins, but eventually found her in the navigation chart room.

"Gee, Chuck, I'm glad to see you! What's happened to Kleiner—why, you look a bit shaken!"

"We both do, then." He noted her disarranged hair, and a tear in the front of her tunic, and momentarily knew a sense of grim, savage satisfaction at Kleiner's fate.

"He fell out of an escape hatch, Celeste. Best not to think about it. We've got to get Jorger to see sense. Lord knows what sort of a time Slim's having up there."

"Just a minute, Chuck." She put a detaining hand on his arm. "What's it all about? Kleiner was bothering me about the Astral Line the luxury ship's coming down on—"

"I've got the whole set-up," he told her. "Kleiner wanted to get the *Stellar* to divert to Sibus, where he's got a powerful bunch of toughs in the launching yards. He knew that some big noise was coming through and planned a kidnapping job to help some crowd at the Traffic Conference—"

"Shady politicians, you mean?"

"Something like that, honey. But I guess it's bust up now."

"Kleiner said he'd got someone with him—"

"Yes," broke in Chuck. "That's the next thing. Jorger sitting at Slim's side with a radium gun. I must get Jorger to see sense, and let me try and overcome the gyro units and pull the ship off the *Stellar's* Astral Line. You'd better stay in the saloon, Celeste—there might be trouble."

"In that case I'm coming, too. My mind's set on it."

CHUCK was first in the control cabin, and took in the situation in a flash. Slim, uneasy, at the co-pilot's controls, with Jorger, hunched like a well-filled sack, against the cabin wall where his radium gun could master both Slim and the cabin door.

"What's Kleiner doing to let you two roam about?" He was not in the least perturbed to see them, and his voice was dull, in keeping with his low intelligence.

"Listen, Jorger," began Chuck, motioning Celeste to sit at the chart table. "The game's up; Kleiner had a nasty break—he went out through an escape hatch into space."

"Huh! Quit foolin'," said Jorger sullenly. "Kleiner ain't that sort of a fool." He snatched a look out of the blister window. "Can't see anything; they reckon anything follows a ship in space—"

"I'm telling you it is so! We had a scrap, and Kleiner went out—gun and all."

Jorger gave him a wooden stare, his big jaws moving on some imaginary wad.

"If that's right, then I'm boss, and I don't see any need to change plans. Get sat down where I can see you. We stay put; the *Stellar's* gotta divert." He waved the gun menacingly. "Sit tight with your girl friend; let Slim do the driving—and to hell with the uneven firing of the tubes. We'll risk the landing! Keep where you are, or else—"

Chuck looked hopelessly at Celeste. Jorger, in his wooden way, was going to be difficult, and there wasn't a ghost of a chance of making a dive at him for the gun. He looked at Slim over the back of the driving seat.

"Slim, are you on Astral 408?"

"Sure thing, Skip—and the set has just begun to pick up the frequency of the *Stellar*. See the blips on the screen?"

Chuck looked at the screen above Jorger's head, and saw that Slim was right. A screen in the *Stellar* would be showing similar signals and puzzling her skipper, causing him to divert to Sibus.

"She can't be so many units away—" He broke off, and jumped to his feet, pointing to an indicator panel. "Look! The set isn't working! The *Stellar*—she'll get no record that we're on her line! Jorger, you fool! Get out of the way—or do you want to hit the *Stellar* head on in space!"

Jorger, hunched in his chair, kept the gun raised, but Chuck saw the colour go out of his face as the thought of such a catastrophe penetrated his slow-moving mind. "You ain't kiddin', Ballister?"

"No, you fool!" cried Chuck. "Get out of the way—God knows how we can get the ship off the Line! Slim, ease off the Inertia Units. Good Lord!" Even in the present tenseness a cry of surprise escaped him, for as Jorger, now thoroughly frightened, lowered the gun and pushed his way past Chuck, Celeste, waiting quietly at the back of the cabin, brought down a chart box on the racketeer's thick head, and snatched the gun from his relaxed fingers as he slumped to his knees.

"Carry on, Chuck!" she cried. "I'll keep him fixed!"

WITH the sweat standing out on his brow, Chuck wrestled with the controls. It was a chancy thing, trying to change the course of an old ship like this. He snatched a look at the Astral Line Meter: allowing for the crooking Kleiner had mentioned, it was still reading 408. He didn't know how long he'd got, but time must be short; the screen was blipping out the *Stellar's* frequencies in lively contrasts to their own dead panel.

"Ease that outer bank of Inertias off, Slim! But do it slow!" Anxiously he watched the Astral meter. 408, still! Curse that number! It was nearly as bad as 13! "A bit more Slim!" He opened his own booster valves a little, and gave a

whoop of joy as the reading on the meter began to change.

"We're safe, Skip, aren't we?" asked Slim a little later. "We're off the *Stellar's* Astral Line."

"Yes, were off, Slim——"

"But only just in time!" It was Celeste, who had left the slumped figure of Jorger, and was gazing out of the window panels. "Look!"

Chuck gazed ahead into space, and saw a brilliant, white dot, which, even as he watched, got larger and larger. It was the *Stellar*, without a doubt! But for a bit of luck in pulling Ship 13 off its Line they'd be rushing to smash each other to dust at speeds of anything around hundreds of units a minute! The dot, with a rapidity which was fantastic, had taken shape, and a moment later, brilliant and flashing in the rays of the Sun, there went by a golden shape, roaring Earthwards with little else than a trail of cosmic dust in its wake.

"That's the *Stellar*, that was!" said Chuck. "I hardly saw it; too quick for the eye. Well, Jorger, your pals will wait on Sibus for nothing; Guess your phony politicians will have to put up with the great man!" He got down out of the driving seat. "I'll just go and open that valve for the jet tubes."

"WELL, that's that," said Chuck after they had finished handing Jorger over to the Terminus police guards. "Seems as if I'm the only one who gets more than a nerve shaking out of this. They're pretty pleased about my luck in getting the old ship off the *Stellar's* Line. Seems a bit thin I should get promotion, and you only get—— a husband!"

"Chuck!" gasped Celeste. "But you're a quick worker!"

"Quick to know I want the greatest girl on any planet!" He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "It's just struck me; I guess 13's my lucky number!"

Editorial . . .

It seems that you readers liked the editorial policy of the first issue of *New Worlds*, judging from the numerous letters we have received. Although we are gratified by your reactions we would like to say that *we* are nowhere near satisfied with the magazine in general. Not by a long way. All we have done so far is to take the first step towards giving you the magazine you have been waiting years for—a British science fiction magazine with a reasonably advanced policy.

Having laid the foundation we can now start building. Each successive issue will see some improvements. With this issue the cover has been radically changed; in the next we hope to improve the interior illustrations; and scheduled for the future are regular departments, a lower selling price and more pages. Unfortunately they can't all come at once, but we'll get round to them just as soon as we can.

We would like to know what *your* particular requirements are and your story preference for this issue.

Our sincere thanks are extended to the hundreds of readers who sent in suggestions for the general improvement of *New Worlds* after seeing the first issue. While it has been impossible to reply individually to every letter, we would like you to know each suggestion is carefully considered and where possible those improvements will be made.

Particularly, we would like to know your reaction to a Readers' Letter section in each issue—or would you prefer the space to be utilised by fiction until such a time as we can increase the number of pages?

Coming up in the next issue is an interplanetary novelette by John K. Aiken with the enigmatic title of "Dragon's Teeth." It's more than just a space adventure though. Backing it up is "Fantasia Dementia," undoubtedly Maurice Hugi's finest story to date—there's a strong flavour of that great American writer Abe Merritt in this yarn; the short stories, all by new writers, set a high literary standard and present some novel futuristic ideas.

The first atom bomb at Bikini seems to have been played down in the general press, largely because the destruction did not appear great nor the bomb plume so spectacular as the Japanese "experiments." However, the vital results of the Bikini bombs aren't likely to be made public—scientists don't usually publicise their laboratory experiments until success has been established.

It has also taken a few atom bombs to make the general public science fiction conscious, for since Hiroshima the magazines have become almost worth their weight in gold. In U.S.A. prices for some back issues have soared to many times their original selling price. It would seem that the public has at last discarded the oft-repeated fallacy that futuristic fiction is fantastic nonsense. The authors are turning out to be one jump ahead of the scientists most of the time and the layman is beginning to take his prophetic fiction with more than just a grain of salt.

To avoid being one of the unfortunates, you should place a regular order for *New Worlds* with your bookseller—or send in a subscription.

THE EDITOR



VICIOUS CIRCLE

By POLTON CROSS

*Time runs in a straight line—but what if one man's Time Line is circular?
The swing of the pendulum would take him further and further into the Past and the Future.*

THIS is the story of a man accursed, of one human being in multi-millions who did not get a fair chance. In a word, I am a sort of scapegoat of Nature. I resent it—bitterly, but there is absolutely nothing I can do about it.

My name is Richard Mills. I am dark, five foot eight, and my age is— Well that's part of the story; but for the sake of convenience let's say that I was thirty-two when the horror started. It's odd, you know, how you don't always appreciate the onset of something enormously significant. I should have guessed that there was something wrong when, from the age of fifteen I often found myself mysteriously a few hours ahead of the right time without knowing how I had done it. I should also have attached suspicion to repeating actions I had done before. But then all of us have felt that we have done such-and-such a thing before—and so like you I didn't think any more about it—

Until the impossible happened!

I had just left the office at 6.15 p.m. (I was then clerk to a big firm of lawyers) and in the usual way I took the elevator to the street level and went outside. The October evening was darkening to twilight and the lights of London were on either side of me as usual, climbing into drear muggy sky.

I remember singing to myself as I swung along. Another day over, Betty to meet, and a cheery evening ahead of both of us. . . . But I did not keep that appointment because, you see, I walked into something which was at once beyond all sane imagining.

One moment I was streaking for the 'bus stop— then the next I was in the midst of a completely formless grey abyss. It had neither up nor down, light nor dark, form nor outline. I was running on something solid and yet I couldn't see it, and it was just when I was trying to imagine the reason for this sudden fog that I found myself still running down a broad highway I had never seen in my life before!

I slowed to a standstill and cuffed my hat up on my forehead as I looked about me. The street had altered inexplicably. It was not grey and dirty but highly glazed, as though the road surface was made of polished black glass. The traffic, too, was strangely designed and almost silent. There were no gasoline fumes: I noticed this particularly. In general the buildings were much the same, only shiny on the facades and somewhat taller.

And the lighting! It was still night, but instead of the usual street illumination there were great

elliptical globes swinging in mid-air somehow and casting a brilliance below that had no shadows. Everything had the pallid brightness of diffused daylight.

"ANYTHING the matter?" a pleasant voice asked me.

I turned sharply as a passer-by paused. Until now I hadn't noticed that the men and women passing up and down the sidewalk were rather odd in their attire—the women in particular. The absurd hats, the queer translucent look of their clothes, the multicoloured paints to enhance their features. . . . Still women, eternally feminine—but different. And now this stranger. He was tall and young with pleasant eyes and the most amazingly designed soft hat.

"I noticed you hesitating," he explained, passing a curious but well-mannered eye over my attire. "Can I help you?"

It surprised me to find anybody so courteous.

"I'm just wondering—where I am," I replied haltingly. "This is London, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Bond Street?"

His look of surprise deepened. "Why, no," he said. "You're on Twenty Seven Street. Don't you remember that all street names were abolished ten years ago to avoid duplication?"

I could only gaze at him fixedly, and he gave a slight smile.

"Look here, you're mixed up somewhere," he said, taking my arm. "It's part of the city's 'Lend-a-Hand' policy for us to help each other, so I'm going to make you my especial charge. . . . Incidentally, the 'Lend-a-Hand' policy is a good idea, don't you think?" he asked, forcing me to stroll along with him. "It's done away with a lot of the old backbiting."

"Oh, surely," I agreed, weakly. "But look here—Er—what sort of cars are those? They're very quiet."

"You mean the atom-cars? Say, where *have* you lived? And if you'll forgive me, that's an awfully old-fashioned coat you've got on. I know it's a breach of courtesy, but. . . ."

I dragged to a stop and faced him directly. "You won't credit this," I said, "but only what seems about ten minutes ago I was running down Bond Street for an ordinary gasoline-driven 'bus. Then I ran into a fog, or something and—suddenly I was here!"

"It would be ill-mannered for me to disbelieve," he said slowly, regarding me, "but I *am* puzzled. It may help you if I explain that you are in London—which was resurfaced with plastic in Nineteen Fifty Eight. The present date is October the twelfth, Nineteen Seventy One."

1971. Twenty-five years! Great God!

Somehow I had slipped a 'quarter of a century

ahead of my own time of 1946. You can think of such things but you dare not believe them. Yet dammit, it had happened! And—

But I had no opportunity to ask my genial friend anything more for he was greying in the return of the mist and I was back again in that blank world where nothing is, or ever was, that is outside time, space, and understanding. I stood wondering and fearful, waiting. This time I sensed that the interval was longer. . . . but when the mist evaporated it revealed that I was back again in familiar Bond Street, only I had moved some two hundred yards from the 'bus stop—or in other words the precise distance I had walked with the stranger!

I BLINKED, mopped my perspiring face, then glanced up at a nearby clock. It was 6.20, the exact time when I had started to run for the 'bus. I had left the office at 6.15—five minutes to get down the street. . . . Then had my other adventure taken up no time whatever?

With an effort I pulled myself together as I saw one or two passers-by looking at me curiously. I had to think this one out—maybe talk it over with Betty Hargreaves since I apparently still had time to meet her.

But she never arrived to keep the appointment. Finally I rang up her apartment, and it was only after the storm with her had subsided that I realised I had arrived back in the same place on on the *following evening*—twenty-four hours later!

I smoothed things over with her as best I could, said I had been sent out of town on urgent business, and we promised to meet at the same time and place the following evening. I didn't add "I hope!" even if I felt like it.

Troubled, I began a contemplative wandering through the city, heading in the general direction of my boarding house— Just the same I never reached it. To my alarm I once more found myself sailing into greyness, and there was nothing I could do to avoid it. My last vision was of a distant lighted clock pointing to 11.15; then it was gone and I was helpless, baffled, frightened.

In this grey enigma all sense of direction, time, and space vanished. I found it safest to stand still and wait until it cleared. It did so eventually and I discovered I was lying in bed in a quiet little room with a grey oblong of window revealing the night sky. I stirred restlessly, puzzled, and reached out a hand for the bedside lamp. When I scrambled out of bed and looked down at myself I got an even bigger shock.

I had the figure of a boy of seven years! I was just as I *had* looked at seven! With a kind of automatic instinct I went to the dressing table and stared at myself in the mirror. There was no doubt about it. I was a child once more, in my own little bedroom at home in Manchester. My parents must be asleep in the next room, but somehow I didn't dare

go and look. . . . Yet I had the memory of everything I had done up to the age of thirty-two!

Impossible! Idiotic! I had grown backwards!

Returning to the bed I threw myself upon it and struggled to sort the puzzle out. But gradually that impalpable mist came creeping back and I left the world of my childhood, wandered for a while in blank unknown, and then merged back into the street from which I had disappeared.

THE FIRST thing I saw was that lighted clock ahead. It was still at 11.15. Presumably I had once again been absent exactly twenty-four hours—and I had travelled twenty-five years backwards, even as on the other occasion I had travelled twenty-five years forwards.

Can you wonder that I was sick at heart, perplexed? It appeared then that my intervals in "normal" time last lasted about five hours—or to be exact 4 hours 55 minutes. Queer how I cold-bloodedly weighed this up. I felt like a visitor who has only five hours to stay in a town before going on his way.

When presently I encountered a police officer I asked him what day it was, and his rather suspicious answer confirmed my theory of a twenty-four hour absence. I got away from him before he ran me in and went straight to Betty Hargreaves' apartment. Fortunately she had not yet gone to bed, and she eyed me with chilly disfavour when we were in the lounge.

"I suppose I cooled my heels because you had urgent business again?" she asked, going over to the sideboard and mixing me a drink. "I've got a telephone, you know. You could have *told* me!"

"I'm sorry—about that appointment, Bet. I just couldn't keep it. I—— er——" I hesitated over the right phrasing. "I sort of keep coming and going."

"You're telling me?"

She handed me my drink and raised a finely lined eyebrow. Betty is a pretty girl, a slim blonde with eyes that are really blue and hair that is really golden. But when she looks annoyed—— Whew!

"I never heard of a financier's chief clerk coming and going as much as you do," she commented presently, sitting down on the divan beside me. "What's happening, Dick? Is there a merger on, or what?"

"No. It's—— er——" I put the drink down and caught at her arm. "Bet, I need help! I'm in one gosh-awful spot."

"Money, or a girl?" she questioned drily. "If the former I can help you out. Dad didn't exactly leave me penniless. If the latter then let's say good night and thanks for the memory."

"Nunno—— it's neither," I said. "It's so hard to explain. . . . You see, I——I keep seeing the future and the past!"

Be it said to her everlasting credit that she did

not even blink. She just gazed, as one might at a lunatic, a baby, or a dipsomaniac. And while she gazed I talked, the words tumbling over themselves. I told her everything, and when I had finished I expected her to laugh in my face. Only she didn't. Instead she was thoughtful.

"It's mighty odd," she said seriously. "And because I know you haven't a scrap of imagination and are too gosh-darned honest to lie for no reason I believe you. But—— it's crazy!" She hugged herself momentarily. "And what are we going to do about it?"

"We!" Bless the girl! She was on my side.

"I dunno," I muttered. "As far as I can estimate I am allowed five hours to live like an ordinary man—then off I go! I don't know if a doctor could explain it, or maybe a psychiatrist. . . ."

"Hardly a doctor, Dick." She shook her fair head musingly. "It isn't as though you've got a pain. It's more like an illusion. You might do worse than see Dr. Pembroke. He's a psychiatrist in the Aldwych Trust Building. I know because a cousin of mine went to him for treatment."

I made up my mind. "I'll see him at the first opportunity. It won't be in the morning because I expect I'll be veered off again at about four fifteen in the small hours. When I can catch up on normal working hours I'll see what he can do for me."

For ridiculous-conversation this probably hit an all time high, yet so sure was I of the things that had happened to me and so staunch was Betty's loyalty, we might have been talking of the next football match. Anyway she was a great comfort to me, and when I left her around 12.30 it was with the resolve to master my trouble when it came upon me again.

I WENT home to my rooms, learned from a note under the door that my firm had telephoned to inquire what had happened to me—and then I went to bed! Funny, but I wasn't tired in spite of everything, and I must have gone to sleep quite normally; but when I awoke again I was not in my bedroom though I was in pyjamas.

It took me several minutes to get the hang of an entirely new situation. I was lying on my back on closely cropped and very green grass. The air was chilly but not unpleasantly so, and the sky overhead was misty blue with the sun just rising. I judged it was still October, but extremely mild.

As I stood up I got a shock. A small group of men and women—attired so identically it was only by their figures I could tell any difference in sex—was watching me. Embarrassed, I stared back at them across a few yards of soft grass, then I was astonished to behold the foremost man and woman suddenly float over to me with arms outstretched on either side. They settled beside me and silver-coloured wings folded back flat on their backs.

"I know," I sighed, as they appraised me. "I've

no right to be here and I'm in the future. All right, lock me up. It won't make any difference."

The man and woman exchanged glances and I had the time to notice that they were both remarkable specimens—tall, strong, athletic-looking, with queer motors strapped to their waist belts from which led wires to the wings on their backs.

After a good deal of cross-talk I found out that they belonged to the local police force, made up of an equal number of men and women, and that I was, of course, both a trespasser and an amazing specimen to boot. . . . But this time, it appeared, I had slipped ahead not twenty-five years but *two hundred*!

I suppose, were I a literary man, I could fill a book with the marvels I discovered, but here it is only policy to sketch in the principal advancements. I learned that their amazing system of individual flight had led to the abolition of ordinary aircraft; that they had conquered space, mastered telepathy, overcome the vagaries of the climate, and completely outlawed war. Yes, it was a fair and prosperous land I saw in 2146.

In the end they locked me up for examination by their scientists, but of course it did them no good, for as time passed I faded away from the prison cell and was back again in London, still in my pyjamas, in the middle of a street—and (I soon discovered) at 4.15 in the morning! Once again, twenty-four hours—since presumably I had vanished while asleep at 4.15 twenty-four hours before.

To be thus thinly clad on an October early morning is no picnic. I took the only sensible course and presented myself at a police station, told the sergeant in charge that I had been sleep-walking and had just awakened. I was believed and I got shelter and a borrowed suit of clothes in which to creep home to my rooms in the early dawn hours.

Now I was getting really frightened! If this were to go on—Lord! I did some computing and figured that I had until about 9.15 in the morning before I'd take another trip—so before that time I had got to see Dr. Pembroke. Unlikely that he would be at his office so early unless the urgency of the reason were stressed.

I rang up Betty, told her what had occurred, and asked her advice. She suggested that I tell Pembroke over the 'phone at his home what had happened, and try to get him to be at his office before nine. She promised to be there. . . .

Dr. Pembroke did not sound at all enthusiastic at first, but he warmed up a trifle when I went into explicit details. Finally he seemed interested enough to agree to be at his consulting rooms by 8.45. So it was arranged, and promptly at quarter to nine I was there with Betty, very serious and determined, beside me.

GRANT PEMBROKE was up to time—a tall, eagle-nosed man with very sharp grey eyes and a tautly professional manner. He ushered us both

into his consulting room with its rather overpowering looking apparatus, and then switched on softly-shaded lights and motioned me to be seated in their immediate focus while Betty sat in the margin of the shadows.

"So, Mr. Mills, you keep imagining you float away into the future and the past at regular intervals, eh?" he asked slowly, settling down and fixing me with those piercing eyes.

"I don't imagine it, Doc. — it actually happens," I told him. "And in about fifteen minutes it should happen again, then you'll see for yourself. . . ."

"Mmmm. . . ." He made a brief examination of me as though he were a medical man, then sat back in his chair again and put his fingertips together. "And while you are away twenty-four hours elapse here?" he questioned thoughtfully.

"That's correct, yes."

"Do twenty-four hours elapse in the place you—er—visit?"

"No. It varies a lot. . . . Only definite timing I've noticed is that on the last occasion I leapt two hundred years ahead instead of the former twenty-five."

"Just so, just so. . . . A most interesting sidelight on Time."

"I don't want to be an interesting sidelight!" I protested fiercely. "I want to live like any other man, marry the girl I love, and keep my job. As things are I look like losing the lot. . . . This sort of thing is—unthinkable!"

"Mmm, just so," he agreed. "But there is the other side, you know— We are dealing with a paradox of Time that has so far only been a theory and never proven. You may have the good fortune to be that living proof!"

I could only assume that he had queer ideas on what constitutes good fortune, and so I kept quiet. For another long minute he studied me, then turning to his desk he began to scribble something down on a notepad. He also made calculations and a drawing that looked like a plus sign with a circle running through it. I was just about to ask him the purpose of this doodling when things happened—once again.

Even as I felt myself drifting into grey mist I noticed the electric clock stood at exactly 9.15; that Betty and Pembroke had jumped to their feet in stunned amazement— Then off I went. And this movement was backwards in Time, not forward.

When the mists cleared I was seated on a wagon, driving a horse leisurely along a winding country road. I saw I was wearing rough breeches and a flannel shirt, while a hot sun was blazing down on my battered straw hat. A yokel? A farmer? A pioneer? I had never been any of these things as far as I could remember—yet here it was.

Glancing inside the wagon I saw a woman and a boy and girl asleep—and far behind my wagon were

many more of similar design kicking up a haze of dust across the desert. . . .

I had to work discreetly to find out what was going on, and very astonished I was to discover that my name was Joseph Kendal, and that the three in the wagon were my wife and two children. We were heading for Georgia, which had been settled by General Oglethorpe a good few years previously. In other words, the General had fixed Georgia as he wanted it in 1732, and this—according to my wife—was 1746. We were changing our domicile, every one of us. . . . But all that signified to me was that I had dropped back two hundred years even as before I had gone ahead for a similar period.

I SCARCELY remember what happened while I was there. It seemed to be an endless trip across the desert with all the old pioneering flavour about it. I fitted into it without any effort: everything I did seemed reasonable and natural, and secretly I was rather sorry when it all had to come to an end just after sunset and I was in the grey mists of Between, Beyond, or whatever it is.

I returned to normalcy seated in that same chair in Dr. Pembroke's consulting room. He was opposite me, looking very weary and untidy. Betty, who had apparently been half-asleep in the chair on the rim of the shadows jerked into life as I sat gazing at her. I glanced round and noticed two white-coated nurses and two men who looked like scientists—

My eyes moved to the clock. 9.15, and judging from the window it was daylight.

"Twenty-four hours to the minute!" Pembroke ejaculated, getting up and coming over to me. "Upon my soul, young man, you didn't exaggerate — We've been waiting, and waiting, ever since you disappeared from view. I summoned the nurses in case of need, and these two gentlemen here are scientists with whom I've been discussing your problem."

"The point is: have you got the answer?" I asked irritably.

"Yes. Yes, indeed," Pembroke assented, and the two scientists nodded their heads in grave confirmation. "But," he added, "it is rather a grim answer. . . ."

"I don't mind that," I said. "Can I be cured?"

They were silent. I set my jaw and glanced helplessly at Betty. She could only stare back at me, tired from the long vigil, and I thought I saw tears in her eyes as though she were trying to control an inner grief. At last I looked back at Pembroke.

"Tell me what you have done and where you have been," he instructed.

I did so, and finished bitterly, "Well, let's have it! What is wrong with me?"

He hesitated, then going over to his desk he handed me a sheet of paper on which was a curious

looking drawing, the finished effort which I had seen him commence just before I had evaporated. The drawing looked like a plus sign. The horizontal line was marked "Past" at the left hand end, and "Future" at the right hand end. Where the vertical line intercepted it in the centre was the word "Now." This same "Now" was also inscribed at top and bottom of the vertical line. So far, so good. Now came the odd bit—

Starting from the exact centre of the plus sign was an ever widening curve, just like the jam line inside a Swiss roll. You know how that line circles out wider and wider! Well, that is what it looked like, and of course it inevitably crossed the right hand section of the horizontal line marked "Future," and the left hand line marked "Past."

So I sat staring at this drawing which looked as though it had come out of "Alice in Wonderland" — then Pembroke started speaking.

"Young man, I don't want to be blunt, but I have to. You are a freak of Nature! Every human being, every animal, every *thing* is following a Time Line through space, and that line is *straight*. You may recall Sir James Jeans' observations on this in his 'Mysterious Universe'?"

I shook my head. "I never read Jeans."

"Mmm, too bad. Then let me quote the relevant statement on page one forty two from the Penguin Edition. . . ." Pembroke picked the blue-covered book up. "He says—'Your body moves along the Time Line like a bicycle wheel, and because of this your consciousness touches the world only at one place at one time, just as only part of the cycle wheel touches the road at one time. It may be that Time is spread out in a straight line, but we only contact one instant of it as we progress from past to future. . . . In fact, as Weyl has said—"Events do not happen: we merely come across them." End quote. . . ."

"AND what has this to do with me?" I demanded.

"Just this." Pembroke returned the book to his desk. "Your Time Line is not *straight*. It operates in a circle, like that circular design you see there. You told me that in earlier life you noticed you were unaccountably late sometimes and unusually early at others?"

"Ye—es," I agreed, thinking. "That's right enough."

"That," Pembroke mused, "can be taken as evidence of the first aberrations in the Time Line you were following. Now it has taken its first real curve. Instead of progressing normally in a straight line you are carried into hyperspace—that grey mist you have mentioned—which is non-dimensional, non-solid, non-etheric: in a word, plain vacuum—"

"But I lived and breathed!" I interrupted.

"Are you *sure*?" he asked quietly.

I hesitated. Now I came to think back. I wasn't!

"You can no more be sure you lived and breathed than you can be sure of what you do under anaesthetic," he said. "But you were still heading along a Time Line—not of your own volition, mind you, but inevitably, because Time sweeps *us* along with it. And so, when the curve struck the normal straight Time Line leading from past to future—the *world* Line, that is, which Earth herself is following—you became a part of it again, but you were twenty-five years ahead of the present."

I nodded slowly. So far he made sense.

"You stayed there for a period of which you are uncertain, chiefly because your sense of Time had become catastrophically upset; and then, still impelled along this circular Time Line you came back through hyperspace and once more intersected the normal Now Line exactly twenty-four hours afterwards. Events then proceeded normally for a while—*still* following the circle—you passed through hyperspace to a past event. Then, hyperspace once more, and so back to Now."

"Then—as the circles grow larger from the centre the gaps will become correspondingly greater?" I questioned, and my voice sounded as though it did not belong to me.

"Just so; and the mathematical accuracy of first twenty-five and then two hundred years—forward and backward—shows that the problem is not a disorder but a mathematical fluke quite beyond human power to alter. You move in a circle, Mr. Mills, not a straight line, and unless at some point the circle turns back on itself—an unlikely possibility since the Universe is a perfect cyclic scheme—I can foresee nothing else but. . . endless circular travelling, gradually taking in vast segments of Time until. . ."

PEMBROKE stopped and the room seemed deathly quiet. For some reason though, I was calm now the thing was explained.

"Can you account for my not feeling tired?" I asked presently.

"Certainly. You somewhat resemble a battery. You use up energy in a forward movement into Time because you are, in essence, moving into the unexplored—but in the backward movement the energy replaces itself because you are merely returning to a state already lived. You cannot grow old, or tired, or suffer from ketabolism in the ordinary way because you represent a perfect balance between ketabolism and anabolism, the exact amount of each being equal because each journey is the same amount of Time—namely, first twenty-five, then two hundred. And next— Well, who knows?"

"Look here," I said slowly. "This last time I went back two hundred years, as I told you, but I was somebody else! A pioneer or something of two centuries ago. I was never *that*!"

"In a past life you must have been," he answered

calmly. "Otherwise you could not have taken over that identity."

"Then when I *was* that person why didn't I know what lay in the future?"

"Perhaps you did. Can you be sure that you didn't?"

This was becoming involved all right, but after all. . . . No, dammit, I couldn't answer it. Maybe I *had* known!

"And when I was a boy of seven?" I asked. "I presume I became a boy again because I was just that at that age?"

"Just so. Time-instants are indestructible. You are bound to become at a certain instant what you are *at* that instant, otherwise Time itself would become a misnomer. You will ask why, at seven years of age, you did not know what you would do at thirty-two. . . ? Again I say, are you sure you didn't?"

"I—I don't know. I don't think so—unless it was buried in my subconscious or something."

"It must have been. It was there, that knowledge, but maybe you considered it as just a dream fancy and thought no more about it, just as we speculate on how we may look in, say, ten years time and then dismiss it as pure imagination. But with you such an imagining would be fact. And incidentally, as for your carrying a memory of these present experiences about with you, remember that your physical self is all that is affected by Time. Mind and memory cannot alter."

"And—what happens now?" I simply dragged the words out.

"For your sake, young man, I hope things will straighten out for you—but if they don't I have a proposition. . . . Tell me, have you any relatives?"

"None living, no. I was intending to marry Miss Hargreaves here very soon."

"Mmmm, just so. Well, the Institute of Science is prepared to subsidise a Trust by which anybody you may name can benefit. In return we ask that in your swing back to the Now Line you will give us every detail of what has been happening to you during your absences. . . ."

I shook my head bewilderedly. "I'll—I'll do it willingly, but I don't want the money. And Bet—— Miss Hargreaves has plenty of money anyway. . . . Doc, isn't there some way?" I asked desperately. "I can tell from you making this proposition that you——"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mills; I really am. But no human agency can get to grips with your problem."

I was silent through a long interval, Betty seated now at my side. I looked at her hopelessly.

"Bet, sweetheart, what do *you* say? Do you know anybody who needs money in trust?"

"No!" she answered bitterly. "Money is the cheapest, most earthly compensation science can offer you for a ruined life. I don't want any part of it. . . . Oh, Dick, for God's sake, there must be some way out of this!"

I shook my head. There wasn't. I knew it now. . . . Finally I told Pembroke that the money had better be handed over to scientific research, and on my all too infrequent returns to Now I would tell all I knew.

"We could marry," I whispered to Betty. "Only it wouldn't be fair to you. A day might come when I'll never return."

"It will," Pembroke confirmed quietly. "When your circular line takes so wide an orbit that it passes beyond the ends of the Now Line into hyperspace."

Then I was doomed indeed! All I could hope for was an occasional glimpse of Betty. As for the rest. . . .

MY five-hour stay was taken up in signing legal documents; then once more I was swept inevitably into hyperspace. So I went through the grey enigma which baffles description, and this time I was six hundred years ahead of the Now Line. There was still progress, the building of superb cities, the conquest of other worlds, a sense of greater equality and comradeship between both sexes. . . .

So back to Now for a brief spell with a tearful Betty, a long description of my experiences to the scientists, a banquet in my honour at the Science Institute—then outwards and backwards into the past, for a gap of another six hundred years.

Back and forth as the circle widened.

I have tried to keep out of this narrative the inner horror I experienced at it all—the dull, dead futility of being flung by nameless force into an ever-widening gulf. Each time, of course, as the circle widened I went further afield.

Hundreds of years, thousands of years, from one end of the pendulum's swing to the other—backwards into scores of lives which had long since been effaced from memory; forwards into a wonder world of ever increasing splendour. . . . Then in the tens of thousands of years ahead I saw Man was pretty close to leaving his material form altogether and becoming purely mental. So much so that on my visit after this one Earth was empty and turning one face to the sun. Age, old and remorseless, crawled over a once busy planet.

At the opposite end of the scale life was swinging down into the Neanderthal man stage, and then further back still to where Man was not even pre-

sent. But there were amoeba, the first forms of life, and I fancy I must have been one of these!

Backwards—forwards—with the visions of Now mere shadows in a universe which was to me insane. Nothing held sense any more. I was losing touch with every well remembered thing, with the dear girl who always awaited my comings and goings—growing older, but always loyal. And around her the cold, impersonal scientists logging down information that could chart the course of civilisations for ages to come. No wonder I had seen progress ahead! My own guidance had prevented any mistakes, and in those distant visions I had seen the fruit of my own advice! Incredible—yet true.

Gradually I realised that my Time Circle was now becoming so huge that it was involving a stupendous orbit which did not include Earth but the Universe as a whole, proving how independent of normal Time Lines had my vicious circle become.

In my swing I saw the birth of the Earth and the gradual slowing down of the Universe—and this I think is destined to be my last return to the Now Line, for the next curve will be so enormous that—Well, I do not think I shall be able to contact the Now Line at all. The scientists have charted it all out for me.

The curve will take me to the period of the initial explosion which created the expanding universe out of—what? That will be in the past. And my futureward movement will carry me to that state of sublime peace where all the possible interchanges of energy have been made, where there exists thermodynamical equilibrium and the death of all that is. At either end of the curve Time is *non-existent*! This is where I may at last find rest.

As I think on these things, writing these last words in the world of Now, I cannot help but marvel at what I have done. . . . But I hate it! I hate it with all my human soul! Opposite to me in this bright room Betty is seated, silent, dry-eyed, faithful to the last. Science is still represented in the quiet men in the chairs by the far wall, all of them busy writing and checking notes.

Never was so strange a sentence passed on a human being!

The greyness is coming! I have no time to write any more—

THE END

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

There were some surprises in the story ratings for the first issue. The two novelettes fought it out for first place but eventually Will Temple's fine fantasy story "The Three Pylons" took top honours over Maurice Hugi's "Mill Of The Gods." The strange fact there was that although most readers rated the Temple yarn top they emphasised the fact that they were not keen on fantasy stories in a science fiction magazine. Each of the shorts shared praises and criticisms and at this time of writing they stand thus:

3. White Mouse
4. Knowledge Without Learning
5. Solar Assignment
6. Sweet Mystery Of Life

THORNTON AYRE
K. THOMAS
MARK DENHOLM
JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

There was very little between third and fifth places.

AHEAD OF REALITY

Science fiction just manages to keep in front of science.

By L. J. JOHNSON

BEFORE Hitler's War, there were groups of enthusiasts all over the world who eagerly perused a form of literature known as "science-fiction." Jules Verne and H. G. Wells were the modern "fathers" of imaginative scientific fiction with such stories of possible future developments as "20,000 Leagues Under The Sea" and "The Time Machine."

Inspired by the vision and sociological value of these early romances, there was published in America a monthly magazine devoted entirely to stories of scientific imagination. Hugo Gernsback first produced "Amazing Stories" in 1926, thus setting a new vogue in the field of magazine literature. The new venture relied at first upon reprints of works by Verne, Wells, Edgar Allan Poe and Edgar Rice Burroughs, and other established masters in this field.

The magazine was an immediate success and new writers flocked in to express in story form their visions of the future.

As the years went by, other publishers, realising the popularity of this type of fiction in a scientific age, brought out their own magazines until there were a dozen or more appearing at regular intervals in America, and attracting to their pages ever more new readers and writers.

This imaginative fiction, with its sweeping visions of future accomplishments, difficulties and disasters, brought into its net many thousands of men and women with scientific and sociological minds. These men and women, such was their enthusiasm, banded together to form societies for the study and promulgation of "scientifiction," as Gernsback dubbed the new literature.

The American magazines reached England, and devotees of Verne and Wells were immediately thrilled by this new source of interest and enlightenment.

FROM stories of startling new inventions and alien menaces to the Earth, writers progressed to studies in story form of the effect upon Mankind of scientific and sociological development.

The readers and writers, most of whom were keen students of scientific progress, were mentally toying with Radar, Rockets and Atom Bombs many years before the War.

On the outbreak of War, the paper situation struck a great blow at the science-fiction movement—as well as other forms of literature—both in this country and America. And fans found themselves

dispersed all over the world by the call to National Service.

But now these enthusiasts are returning from a scientific War, in which they have seen brought to realisation many of the inventions foreseen by their favourite form of literature.

They find that science is catching up with science-fiction.

The members of the British Interplanetary Society, child of the science-fiction movement, have returned to work to find their task has been completed for them in principle during their absence.

The fans have returned to a world well acquainted with jet planes, V1 and V2, Radar contact with the Sun, Moon and Mars, and above all the Atom Bomb. They find themselves living in a world of science-fiction instead of reading about it. They have great difficulty in refraining from satisfying retorts of "I told you so."

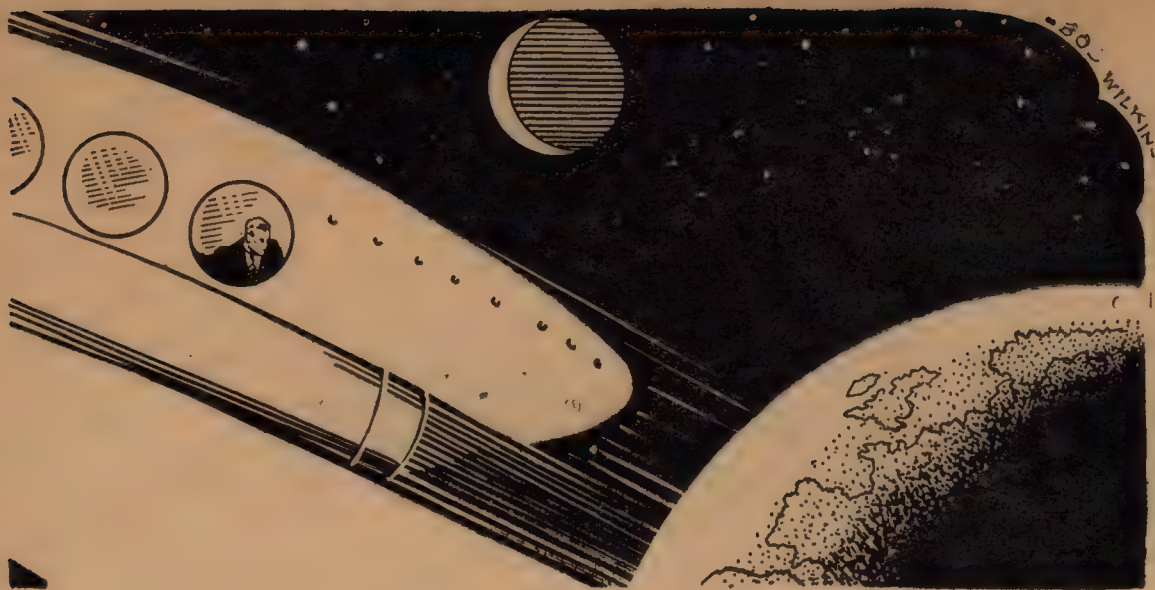
They pick up their pre-War magazines, and find many of the stories hopelessly out-of-date. Even stories of interplanetary and interstellar space travel have lost much of their novelty. For the release of Atomic Energy has not merely placed Man on the brink of destruction, but also on the brink of Outer Space.

The power of the Atom has been used in many science-fiction stories to propel our heroes away from the Earth to the Moon, the Solar System and even to the stars of Outer Space. And these possibilities are no mere fantasy, for once harnessed to a space ship the energy of the Atom will give the complete answer to the power problems of bridging Space.

But the post-War science-fiction enthusiast still has a good start on Reality. For many years his heroes and heroines have explored the most hidden places of this Earth; they have been travelling to Yesterday and To-morrow in Time Machines; landing on the Moon, Mars and Venus and even further afield; they have been fighting wars with rockets, rays and Atom Bombs; they have had space ships equipped with Radar for detecting meteors, while on their way around the Solar System.

They have also had sociological problems to contend with, as in "Metropolis"—a famous science-fiction film—in which the hero's task was to smash a Totalitarian system of scientific control of the workers. Strangely enough the film was German.

So far, science fiction has managed to keep one jump ahead of reality, but, scientifically, Man is fast catching up his own imagination—only the ostrich and the ignorant can ignore the speculative Future.



LUNAR CONCESSION

BY THORNTON AYRE

*The Moon, when it is developed, should be a miner's dream world.
There might even be life of some kind on the side we cannot see . . .*

I.

THE usual round of international squabbling, bickering over colonial rights and economic differences was thrown in the shade in early 1987 by Dagenham Pye's amazing record flight to and from the Moon. It was not the space trip itself which was so remarkable—after all, space travel has been in vogue now for ten years—but it will be recalled that Pye's meteoric speed through infinity aroused more than normal interest.

He revealed that he possessed a new type of fuel, a little of which went a long way. That was the sum total of the information he would give to persistent radio, television and Press representatives. The fuller details of his record flight were only for the privileged few—and because at that time I had done quite a little roving about in space myself I was present at the banquet given in his honour in the home of Ann Drew, recently become the heiress of the Drew multi-millions and owner of the powerful British Drew Space Corporation by the sudden death of her father.

I hardly need to describe the lionising and feting: you will recall the televised details; but I can take you behind the scenes to matters of a very different nature—as, for instance, when Ann, Count Vaston Randi, Pye and myself all got together to discuss matters on the terrace.

I remember that we were all very eager—except Count Randi. I could not quite decide about him. He was foreign, even though he spoke perfect English. I had been given to understand he was of Russian and French extraction—a pale, dark haired man, extremely tall and faultlessly mannered. In other words, just the kind of dress-suit Romeo it pleased a girl like Ann to have about her, always paying her compliments. Otherwise he seemed harmless enough.

Then, there was Dagenham Pye—dark and quick, with a hint of mystery in his manner and speech, legacy of long service in the Interplanetary Secret Service before he had taken to space racing with his new fuel. . . .

Ann herself, incredibly blonde, incredibly fluffy, and I am afraid at times incredibly senseless, listened most of the time to Pye's statements with her very kissable red lips parted in eager wonder.

And me? Well, I am a pretty ordinary sort of chap—not quite six feet, black-headed and blue eyed, with a pile-driver fist and feet big enough to tread any planet in God's great universe. My name does not mean anything—Clement Dixon, bestowed on me thirty-three years ago.

Well, there we were on the terrace with Pye talking with his usual machine-gun rapidity, flicking cigarette ash all over his suit.

"I tell you the stuff's dynamite!" he declared, thumping his knee. "You see, I happened to be lucky. I spent a bit of money in buying a plot of territory on the Moon's other side, but directly under this territory I found the fuel. I'm as lucky as a man with an old time oil gusher in his own back garden. Five feet below the surface of the Moon are tons of fuel. In fact, most of the Moon is hollowed out, only it happens that I have an advantage over the others because I have a special way in. Besides, it looks as though my particular concession is the main fuel source."

"Whereabouts is your fuel plot, Dag?" I asked.

He tugged out a small, but perfect scale, map of the Moon's other side, traced a stumpy finger across it.

"Here," he said, "are the Dawn Edge Mountains; that is where the view of the Moon from the Earth ends. Now, down in all this area there is, of course, air—pulled into the deeply sunk valley caused by Earth's perpetual gravitational field. Nothing active or dangerous living in the green stuff except, of course, the *Diggers* and *Flame Bugs*. Now here is Devil's Nose Rock. Two miles to the east of it"—more finger jabbing—"is my plot. Just here. I bought it from the Government and I thought it might give off a tidy profit as a trading centre, until I found this stuff below at five feet depth. That altered matters considerably. I got samples of the stuff, had them analysed, and—well, the result was a record flight!" he wound up blandly.

"BUT what possessed you to look underground?" I asked surprisedly.

"Quite a commonplace thing, really. You see, the lunar night is diabolically cold, and I noticed that the *Flame Bugs* and *Diggers* all trekked to some part of my plot at sundown. On one occasion I wrapped myself up in a space suit and followed them—for, believe me, I'd have frozen to death without a space suit's protection—and I discovered a fairly wide fissure leading below. I got down and had a look round—found the *Diggers* and *Bugs* all as cosy as you please. . . ." He shrugged briefly. "Well, I found the fuel anyway. Being a chemist, I put two and two together when I saw an eruptive crater in the underground cavern. . . . But that's another story," he finished, with a guarded smile.

"So wonderful, don't you think?" Ann asked brightly, clasping her hands. "It must be marvellous to have such a scientific mind. . . ! You know, Daggy, you're much too clever to just pilot a space machine and break records! You ought to be settling affairs of State and things like that," she wound up vaguely.

Nobody spoke for a moment. Matter of fact she had come near truth. War was right on our horizon once again, blowing in from Europe in close alliance with the East. . . . Then Vaston Randi held forth in his slow, calm voice, fingertips together.

"Since this stuff is so valuable, Pye, why don't you find a company to commercialise it? Why not expand it into a business? We need a fuel like that, not only for space travel but for armaments and war materials. The possibilities are. . . . Well, almost limitless."

Pye shrugged. "I've been thinking of something like that, Count. Up to now I am the only one who has the ownership of the lunar concession, the only one who knows exactly what the stuff looks like. Naturally, now I've proved the stuff's worth I intend to cash in on it. I'm going to start looking for a bidder as soon as possible, somebody who will take over the whole concession and mine the stuff. It'll turn in a vast fortune. By the way, I call the stuff *Potentium*. A piece the size of a pea will drive a space machine to the Moon and back. I've proved it. That was all the fuel I used to break the record."

"What!" I cried incredulously. "Why, that sounds almost like atomic force!"

He shook his head slowly. "No, Clem—*potential* force. Hence the name I've given it. . . ."

"One moment," Randi broke in thoughtfully. "Would you consider a private bidder for your concession? Need it of necessity be a space company who buys?"

"Why no. I've no objection to a private bidder. The cheque is my main interest, I'm afraid. I don't want the job of mining the stuff anyway—I'm not the type. Besides, I'm not a first-class engineer."

"The Interplanetary Space Service turned me into an eternal rover, I'm afraid—I said a space company because I thought they would be the only people likely to pay my price."

"Which is?" Randi murmured, gazing into the soft summer dark.

"One million pounds, outright sale. Profits will multiply a thousand fold in no time."

"One million. So!" Randi looked momentarily rueful. "You are a business man, my friend. But suppose. . . ."

"I'll give you two million!" Ann exclaimed suddenly, and giggled a little. "I've always wanted to do something big—like this! I'd just love to own a—a dynamite factory! Daddy was always sure I'd make a business woman if I had the proper opportunities."

Randi sat up in his basket chair as she went off into another snigger. I fancied that for a moment a queer light had come into his dark, sombre eyes. He flashed a glance at Pye, then back to Ann.

"But Ann, my dear, what would you do with this concession?" he asked gently. "Think of the details involved! Expert spacemen, miners, Governmental details, thousands of pounds in labour alone. . . ."

"I'll handle that," said I, turning to her. "If you'd let me?"

"But of course!" she cried. "You silly boy, what's the use of having you about if you don't do something? And you shall have a nice fat salary and a shiny office."

Funny thing about Ann. For all her feathery, crazy ways, she had a ring of something downright about her. A bit of a chump yes, but she had a sterling quality that made one unable to dislike her.

"Look here, are you serious about this?" Pye asked keenly, at last.

"Why not?" Ann demanded. "I'm wealthy enough. . . ."

"I'll give you two and a half million!" Randi said suddenly, his voice very urgent. "That's my limit."

Ann hesitated a moment then she shrugged her bare, creamy shoulders and sighed, "Oh well, make it three million. I believe in paying for a thing if it interests me. After all, Vassy, you don't mind very much do you?" she pouted, gazing across at him. "I do so want to be a business woman."

"You have strange ideas of business, my dear," he said, with frigid politeness—and at the same time I thought I never saw a man kill a girl so effectively without physical force. His eyes had lost that lap-dog quietness and were brittle and cold—but when it made no effect on Anh his shoulders went up resignedly and he relaxed.

"Do just as you wish, my dear," he murmured. "I only thought I would like to invest. Your gain is my loss. But just the same. . . ." He stopped and mused, gazing into the dusk again.

"Well?" Ann enquired.

"Would it interfere with your business sense if I helped you?" he asked quietly. "Just as a friend, I mean?"

"Why—why, no." Ann looked at me. "Would it, Clem?"

"I suppose not," I replied shortly, but I was thinking of that look I had seen in Randi's eyes. To him I added, "Do what you like, Count, but just the same I'm still going to handle the man's end. I know all there is to know about mining for explosive. I've had a year collecting *ampite* compound from Mars, you know."

"You're quite indispensable, I'm sure," Randi conceded. "Ann is most fortunate."

I did not reply because I was thinking I was pretty fortunate too. I needed a job for one thing. A spell of space-sickness had knocked me off the payroll of my old company and space jobs soon fill again. Illness in my business means long unemployment. Though Ann was a close friend of mine, of any man's for that matter, I could not ask her outright for money, though she would probably have given it to me by the trainload if I had. It was better to earn it this way. . . . Besides, there was that nasty look in Randi's eye, something in the acid flattery of his smile. . . .

"THEN it's a bargain?" Pye asked suddenly.

"Of course!" Ann got to her feet and left the terrace. She came back with her cheque book. She scribbled with the ease of a girl with too much cash and too little sense, handed the cheque over. Pye nodded slowly over it and pulled out his wallet, laid a recognisable Interplanetary Concession form on the wicker table, filled out the space provided for endorsement and receipt.

"And this endorses the concession over to you," he said, handing it over. "I'll come with you on the first trip, of course, to show you the exact nature of the stuff you're to mine. Now, here is the formula of quantities for safe usage, which you'd better hand over to your laboratory experts. And here is the map. . . ."

I looked over Ann's shoulder as she studied the various papers. Precious little went into her care-free head, I imagine, though she looked solemn enough. Still the papers were in order: I could tell that at a glance. Then Randi came silently forward—but he was not quite quick enough. I folded the papers just as he arrived and he shrugged a little, regarding me levelly.

"Surely, if I am to help—?" he asked.

"To help does not mean to know everything," I retorted. "The formula, and concession, are Ann's personal property—not even the property of the Drew Space Corporation unless she wishes it. It was private account, wasn't it, Ann?" I asked her.

She nodded her blonde head proudly. "All my very own!"

Randi still looked at me. "You are most cautious, Mr. Dixon. . . ." He lighted a cigarette and blew the smoke gently towards me.

"Life's made me that way," I said briefly—then I went over and pushed the bell, told the butler to find Sykes Henson, the Drew Company's own legal expert. He came in, bald and perspiring, from the ballroom—but before he left us he had legally finished off the details, got Pye's signature to numberless ready printed forms, and fastened the formula in a heavily sealed envelope signed in Ann's own hand. Without her instructions—or mine, as her manager—nothing could be done.

And Randi was anything but pleased, even though he tried to be as courtly as ever.

At last I managed to get Ann away from him, left him talking to Pye. We wandered away to the edge of the rooftop terrace and gazed over the quiet calm of the Buckinghamshire countryside. This estate tucked away far in the country was a delightfully soothing place for a man like me, used to battling with unknown things on unknown worlds.

"Don't you think it's wonderful, Clem?" Ann sighed wistfully, resting her elbows on the parapet and clasping slender jewelled fingers under her chin.

I did not know whether she meant the countryside or the concession, so I said rather bluntly:

"Ann, you need a keeper!"

"Keeper?" Her blue eyes were astonished in the terrace globes. "Oh, Clem, how could you—"

"You nearly threw three million pounds down the drain," I said, trying to be patient. "Count Randi did his utmost to burst in and see what was written off that formula. You ought to be more careful! And see that Randi confines his interests to Earth, too. Frankly, Ann, I don't trust him!"

"Oh, you men!" She smiled in that irresistible feminine way of hers. When she smiled like that I wanted to stop being tough and scoop her up, frills and perfume and all, into my arms. Since I could not help being tough I went on growling out sentences.

"This thing's got to be properly organised, and I'm the man to do it. I'll run the expedition myself. Have I your authority to do that?"

"Of course. I just wouldn't know *what* to do without you. . . . But I'm coming on this expedition too, you know."

"But, Ann!" I protested. "There may be danger—"

"Daggy said there wasn't. Only fleas and things— Or was it bugs?" Her tip-tilted nose wrinkled in distaste, then she straightened up. "Anyway, I'm coming! I'm a business woman now, and I ought to be on the spot, don't you think, in case my advice is needed."

I could not help laughing outright at that one. I could not picture anything further removed from either business woman or explorer—but she had a determined kink in her which was a decided relic of her masterful father.

"All right, I'll arrange it," I promised. "I'll have everything under way in a week or two. . . . Now let's forget it for a while. You owe me a dance."

Immediately she was close against me and I felt as we floated into the ballroom, with her blonde head so close to my face, that I had a sudden task in life—to protect this generous little fool against the subtle courtesies of a gentleman who had a smile about as friendly as pack-ice.

II.

IN THREE weeks I had things fairly well sorted out, had made all the necessary plans for a preliminary investigation of Pye's lunar concession. If it was all it was claimed to be it would be a simple matter afterwards to transport the necessary mining engineers.

I fixed it so that I was to be the pilot of the investigation ship. Pye was also to come along, of course, as adviser. Then there was Ann: she made it clear she would not take any refusal. Last, but not least, there was my pet swamp-hound from Venus—"Snoops."

Queer little chap, Snoops—not unlike a Chow in shape, but there all similarity ended. He had webbed feet, one very serious blue eye in the middle of his flat forehead, a coat as soft as eiderdown,

and a fanlike tail. Normally, he had a temper like a dove—but he could be unbelievably savage when roused, and never forgot a harsh word or an injury.

Since he had been instrumental in saving my life on an ill-starred Venusian swamp expedition I felt it almost a duty to look after him, and, to my gratification, Earth and space life seemed to suit him perfectly. . . .

That was the sum total of our party. We fixed the date for July 7th, 1987, and since I had ordered the strictest secrecy there were only a few mechanics to watch us when we took off from the Drew space grounds. . . . Once we were free of the atmosphere I put the automatic pilot into action and turned back into the main living room.

You can imagine my indignant amazement when I saw a long, dark haired figure murmuring flatteries to Ann. Pye, taking no part in the proceedings, was seated smoking in a corner regarding Randi with a clearly disgusted stare.

"How did you get aboard?" I demanded, striding over to him. "Without wishing to give offence, Count, you were certainly not invited!"

He smiled at me, a smile of triumph. "But I was," he murmured. "Ann herself saw to that. Didn't you, my dear?"

She flushed a little as she turned to me. Shyly, she said, "Well, you see, Clem, Vassy was so persistent in his wish to help me that I just couldn't refuse him. I—I mean— Well, I put him in the wardrobe of my cabin until the trip began, and— Oh, why do you stare at me like that?" she broke off tearfully, as I stood grimly waiting. "One might think I—I had no say in this thing at all!" Out came her square inch of silk and dabbed her watering eyes.

I looked steadily at Randi. "In other words, Count, you just wormed your way in, eh? I might have expected it! You twisted Ann round your little finger to get in on this expedition and find out all there is to find. . . . Well, I'm in charge here, and if there's one hint of anything suspicious from you I'll fix you so the authorities can take care of it when we get back to Earth. So long as you behave yourself you can come along. But watch yourself!"

"One would imagine you do not like me," he sighed, lighting a cigarette.

"I don't!" I snapped. "And neither would Ann if she had had as many men to deal with as I have!"

That started her off properly and the waterworks began to operate overtime. Randi gave me a crooked grin and started to console her. I gave it up and went back into the control room. I was beginning to feel fed up already with the whole business, mainly because I could not for the life of me imagine what Randi was driving at and also because Ann's crazily generous streak might make her capable of any crass folly to queer the expedition. I had my hands full all right.

I took a good look at our objective floating

serenely in space, almost at the full—then Pye came lounging in and regarded me seriously.

"Look here, Clem, I hope you don't think I had anything to do with Randi coming along," he said anxiously. "I only——"

"You're all right, Dag," I interrupted him. "But it certainly looks as though this concession is starting trouble already. What kind of trouble I don't exactly know yet—but we'll find out."

He nodded slowly and switched on the radio. The same old Earth jargon came floating through on the ultra short space waves.

"War is imminent! All Europe and Asia stand ready for a supreme conquest! Every man must stand to arms! Every woman must prepare for sacrifice! To-day the British authorities rounded up a ring of European espionage agents. The ring-leader, the notorious Valon Kintroff, is still missing and——"

Pye switched off savagely, stormed up and down the little cabin.

"War! Espionage!" he shouted bitterly. "What the hell's the use of anything any more? Every time we get on top a war blows up. One could think that by this time there might be common sense! It makes me sick!"

He turned and went out glumly. Randi, who had heard his outburst, made an observation about killing being an art. That seemed to set Pye thinking, for the next time I saw him through the glass partition he was seated in the living-room with his head buried in his hands, musing.

Ann's display of tears had stopped and she was playing a game with Randi—the current craze of "Give and Take," not unlike a great-grandchild of mid-century "Monopoly." From what I could hear Randi was winning. The game finished with Ann owing him an imaginary continent, and following the rule of the game she gloomily signed the paper admitting her likewise imaginary debt.

Idly I watched Randi push the paper in his pocket, then I turned back to my observation port and stared out on the velvet dark of space, the flowing silver of our goal.

A sudden antithesis swept over me. Squabbling on Earth, for *what*? Hadn't past wars settled anything? And out here the sublime, indescribable glory of infinity—that had been—that would be, long after man had become a wisp of dust in eternal time. Out in space it is quite impossible to believe in tawdry humans. They just have no part.

WE MEASURED our days and nights by clocks, of course, since there is no night in space—and they were "days" which passed quietly enough at first.

Pye, for his own amusement, typed out a daily log of events, one of which included our stoppage at the half-way line by the ever active Space Patrol. We were searched, asked to produce every legitimate

reason for our moonward journey, then allowed to proceed.

But for the most part Pye seemed intensely preoccupied about something, and all my efforts to get at the root of the trouble were unavailing. Then, on the fourth morning out, we encountered tragedy. While the rest of us had been asleep poor Pye had committed suicide.

There seemed to be no possible doubt about it. A typewritten letter in his quiet, orderly cabin was the surviving clue, a letter which intimated he was too afraid of world crisis and war to live any longer. He would rather be out of it all. . . . He must have opened the emergency airlock and jumped outside into the void. Anyway, there was a dark grey speck keeping close to the ship all the time, which could only be Pye's corpse caught by our slight attractive field.

It hit me badly, for I had liked and admired Pye. I recalled his outburst in the control room, his recent thoughtful mood—but even then I could not somehow reconcile the facts with his natural space-roving toughness. The business had me baffled—but there it was. What could I do? Perhaps an attack of space sickness had driven him to it: I have known it to happen.

Randi seemed sorry, but nothing more than that. Poor Ann had a great chance to go prostrate over the matter and stay in her room nursing an attack of grief. I do think, though, that she was really sorry. She loved most people with genuine, sex-free affection, and Pye's untimely end struck her deep.

It put a new face on the expedition, too. We would simply have to trust to luck that we would find the right stuff. We had all the directions, except the most vital one of all.

Ann and I tried our best to avoid looking at the grey corpse behind us—but I saw Randi studying it once and blowing smoke rings at the same time.

WITH ordinary fuel, such as we were using, it is about six and a half days' journey to the Moon, and after Pye's decease things passed fairly quietly. Ann was much quieter, and Randi spent a good deal of time with her. I spent mine either playing with Snoops or watching the great globe of Moon rising through space, the notched fingers of shadows cast across its waning disc.

And so at last it came time for the landing.

We dropped within a mile of Devil's Nose Rock. The sun was half way to the zenith, just clear of Dawn Edge Mountains, a range entirely encircling the huge valley which forms the Moon's other side.

From our position part of the valley was spread out before us, sweeping down into a deep, verdure-choked cup. Here and there amidst the sprawling green—day vegetation only, withering in the bitter cold of the fortnight-long lunar night—smoked and fumed carbon dioxide geysers, connected by natural shafts to the dying fires in the Moon's core. Carbon

dioxide, broken down by the plentiful supplies of ephemeral green stuff, formed into breathable oxygen of almost Earthly density. Such a thing could only exist in this gravity-drawn valley—for, as science has proved, the Earthward side of the Moon, which we of Earth always see, is dead—airless, finished.

Here in the valley the shadows had lost their savage black and white aspect: they were softly tempered as an Earth shadow, and through the midst of them swarmed the strange lunar *Flame Bugs*, myriads of them, a little larger than dragonflies, sweeping in endless hordes in and out of the pouring sunshine, revelling in the protracted lunar day.

And then there were the *Diggers*. We could not see them from the ship, but from record—and Pye's own observations—the place teemed with them—savagely active, molelike creatures, for ever burrowing with a seemingly blind purposelessness, but probably because being heat lovers they were always trying to get nearer to the Moon's still smouldering internal fires.

"Interesting," observed Randi at last, his eyes fixed on the distant, but unmistakable formation of Devil's Nose Rock. "Just the same, with all these thousands of clefts and ruts in the valley side, it is going to be difficult trying to find Pye's fissure. He could have taken us straight to it. . . ."

"It's wonderful!" Ann broke in excitedly, the business of our mission right over her head for the moment. "I've never seen anything away from Earth before. Just look at those darling little *Flame Fleas*!" she went on rapturously. "It makes me want to go out with a net and catch some. I brought one, you know—on the off chance," she added surprisingly. "I've a small cage too."

"We didn't come here to hunt those things, Ann," I said, a bit impatiently. "And you'd better get into suitable clothes, too. We are going outside. . . . And don't forget a topee as well!"

She nodded promptly. "I'll wear a dark blue silk blouse to match the sky," she said reflectively, and with that she tripped off. I turned from watching her to find Randi eyeing me.

"Suppose, Dixon, we come to grips?" he suggested quietly.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that you drop your high-handed attitude and include me in on this expedition? Be reasonable, man, and stop trying to freeze me out! After all, I'm not trying to do anything beyond help Ann."

"Do you mind very much if I say I don't believe you?" I retorted. Then I went on more quietly. "However, I have to admit that I cannot very well stop you helping us. Just the same, I'll see to it that you gain nothing from whatever you may learn."

"Always looking ahead," he said regretfully.

"What a pity we have not got Pye to help us."

His gaze rose for a moment to the spired heights

of Dawn Edge Mountains. I knew in that moment that he was thinking of the grey speck that had dropped there as we had landed— Then he turned aside without a word and went off to dress for our excursion.

III

HALF an hour later we were out in the blazing sunshine. Ann fell over twice in her excitement, forgetting the lesser gravity of the Moon after the space ship's attractor plates—but her mishaps did not dampen her high spirits and rather pointless vapourings.

Randi and I walked silently together and Snoops came up behind us, sniffing suspiciously. In fact, I never saw him quite so uneasy. His absurd tail was standing upright, an action I had learned to interpret as the prelude to his rare fits of passion. Glancing about me, however, I could see no reason then for his mood. Everything was quiet. The hot sun, the distant verdure, the scorching rocks—they were all unchanged.

Pulling out Pye's map I studied it carefully, made measurements, pointed out directions, but although we wandered for nearly two hours we could not find that one elusive fissure which would give ingress to the underworld. As Randi had remarked earlier, the surface around Devil's Nose Rock was cracked into millions of fissures, nearly every one of them blind, and to find one in particular that went clean through to below, without a specific guide, was a next to impossible feat.

"We might never find it without assistance," Randi remarked as we halted to review the situation. "Unless we wait until night, when the *Diggers* and *Bugs* head for below."

"And that means working in space suits because of the cold," I grunted. "Wasting valuable hours of time. . . ."

"There is no other way," he said, reflecting. "Pye said the underworld begins at five feet down. If we get out the drilling apparatus there's nothing to stop us drilling a shaft of our own and be damned to the fissure."

"Now why didn't I think of that!" Ann exclaimed, frowning.

"Looks as though you have the right idea, Randi," I had to admit, and we returned to the ship for the equipment, set it up in the approximate centre of the area Pye had owned.

Starting up the automatic driller, we watched it commence its steady biting into the rocks. A slow haze of dust began to rise in the quivering hot atmosphere. Presently we all three sat down thankfully on the rocks and relaxed.

"Just look at those flame things!" Ann exclaimed presently, shading her eyes and gazing. "Millions of them! Don't you think it would be wonderful if we collected some?"

"What the dickens for?" I demanded blankly.



"They are already classified in the Planetary Museum in London anyhow."

"I know that—but think how lovely a score of them would look on an evening frock—professionally dried and hardened, I mean. I'd be the rage of the West End!"

I just could not answer that one. Here was a girl with three million pounds banked on us finding *Potentium*, and she had to talk about evening frocks and dried *Flame Bugs*! It was clear, though, that the things fascinated her. Chasing about in the lesser gravity with a butterfly net would be just about her idea of a thrill. . . . She went on vapouring idly, but I was not listening.

I was eagerly watching the drill's slow progress as it bit a two-foot-wide circle in the rock and hardened volcano pumice. I turned to make a comment to Randi, then paused at a sudden bass growling from Snoops. The three of us glanced up

sharply. Ann was the first to cry out.

"Look! Moles like lobsters! Oh, Clem, aren't they cute——"

"*Diggers!*" I interrupted her, watching them intently. "I might have known it. They seem to scent when anybody or anything starts to dig inwards. . . . Take it easy. They're harmless enough."

We studied perhaps a score of the strange looking grey shapes as they came towards us on their crab-like feet. Their mouths, fitted by Nature with a naturally sharp drill in swordfish fashion, were opening and shutting spasmodically, following the usual custom of snapping up invisible mites in the air.

Then all of a sudden there was wild confusion. Snoops' growling abruptly veered off into a hoot of fury. He shot upwards like a gigantic muff and charged at the advancing creatures. Immediately they scattered, then came back to the attack. Within

seconds Snoops and *Diggers* were mixed up in a snapping, snarling mass of dust and flying pebbles.

Randi grinned sardonically. "Evidently that swamp hound of yours doesn't like *Diggers*," he commented, obviously enough. "Sort of cat and dog act——"

"Snoops, come here!" I bawled, racing down into the melee. "Come here, damn you——!"

I ploughed through the midst of the drilling little devils, kicking them to one side, tore off those which had fastened their pincer-claws into Snoops' fluffy body. He was bleeding a little. A drop or two fell on my breeches and the *Diggers* flew for it right away until I clubbed them off with the butt of my revolver.

Breathless, Snoops hugged tightly to me. I stumbled back to Randi and Ann. Instantly she took Snoops from me, cuddled him under her arm and softly stroked his head.

"There, now, poor little Snoopy. Did he get cross, then. . . ."

"Better keep him locked up after this," Randi remarked drily. "He may get hurt if you don't, and I'd hate to have that happen."

Had Ann not been present I'd have called him something for that. As it was I compressed my lips and looked back at the slowly returning *Diggers*—then Ann went into action with a very feminine, but very determined, "shooing" act. Her warlike leaps and noises were enough to keep the *Diggers* away. In the intervals she took Snoops to the ship and gradually bound him up with lint tied in chocolate box bows.

IN TWO hours our drill had gone down three feet, moving more slowly now on account of the tougher material packed below. There was little to be gained from just watching, so we returned to the ship for a rest and a meal, leaving the apparatus to its own devices.

With some astonishment we found that we had been at work for eight hours. Time is like that on the Moon. The protracted day—the slow movement of the sun across the heavens—the lesser gravity, all combine to play havoc with one's sense of timing. It was the meal that showed us how the blistering heat had tired us.

There were no objections to my suggestion that we should get some sleep before restarting work. My last vision before I securely closed the airlock was of the *Diggers* nosing round our still functioning drill and the eternal *Flame Bugs* swirling in the sunshine. Then I went off to my cabin to get some rest, leaving Snoops in the control room on guard.

In fact, it was Snoops who awakened me. His snuffling, prodding muzzle dug insistently into my ribs until I was forced to take notice of him. I sat up, yawning, saw through the port that the sun was considerably higher in the sky. According to my

watch another eight hours had slipped by. The drill ought to be through by this time.

I washed and tidied myself up, then I became aware that Snoops was remarkably agitated about something. He kept running in and out of my cabin and finally he clamped his teeth on my bootlace and began to pull me insistently.

Naturally I followed him, and the moment I entered the control room I got a shock. The airlock was swinging wide open—open to the drowsy stillness of the lunar mid-day. That started me on a wild search, and within three minutes I had found it was Ann who was missing! Randi sleepily demanded to know what was wrong, but I had no time to waste on him. Instead, I followed Snoops' anxious prowling, went with him across the burning rocks until I reached our now deserted drilling equipment.

As I had expected, the work had finished itself and a bottomless, narrow hole lay beneath the automatically stopped drill. I gazed at the shaft, then started at a sudden cry from its dark depths.

"Help! Is somebody there? Clemmy, is that you?"

"Ann!" I gasped in relief, and flung myself down flat on the shaft edge. "Where the deuce are you?" I shaded my eyes and peered.

"Down here of course!" came her indignant retort. "I'm not tall enough to get up and the shaft edge is too smooth. See—here's my hand!"

I watched intently and saw something vague and white twisting in the gloom. I reached to the limit of my capacity and grasped it tightly.

"How did you get in here?" I demanded, staring at the smudge I took to be her face.

"I—I fell in—and I'm scared! Help me up and stop asking silly questions."

I reached down with both hands, gripped her upflung wrists, and heaved. The weak gravitation and her own natural lightness made it a simple job. In a few moments I had lifted her bodily into the sunshine and sat her down on the rocks.

SHE was filthy dirty, her bare arms caked in dust, her hair and face smothered. For a long time she sat with her knuckles crammed in her eyes, accustoming herself to the blinding light. Then, by degrees, she looked at me, and I just could not help bellowing with laughter at her comic appearance.

"It isn't funny!" she complained, shuddering as she surveyed herself. Then she said, "You see, Clem, I couldn't sleep properly. I was too hot. I could see the *Flame Bugs* through my window and I got to thinking about that evening frock. . . . Well, I got out my net and decided to hunt them. I went quietly and took Snoops with me for protection against the *Diggers*. I found when I got here that the *Diggers* had gone and that this shaft was finished. . . . I leaned over to look down, but I

think Snoops imagined I was playing a game. He charged playfully at me, I lost my balance, and down the shaft we both went. I wasn't hurt much because of the slight gravity—but I could not get up again without help. I'm too small."

She stopped and looked at me ruefully, wiping her face. I tried not to grin and asked politely, "And what happened then?"

"Well, I wandered about a little, trying to decide what to do. There were a lot of *Flame Bugs* flying about, and since they give a phosphorescent sort of light I could see pretty well—so I went along the narrow tunnel into which I'd dropped. This tunnel ended in a huge cave, and I think it's the one Daggy Pye mentioned."

"You mean it?" I exclaimed eagerly. "Then you—"

"There were other tunnels and more caves beyond it," she went on seriously. "Sort of all the insides of the Moon. But there was something else, too, Clem—something that scared the wits out of me! A great rumbling and roaring noise comes from somewhere deep inside the Moon; and there were hot winds and things too. I saw the reflection of white light cast on the walls and in the shadows were thousands of *Diggers* crouched round a kind of luminous crater. It was frightfully weird. I think our newly made shaft provides an easier way into the underground than the fissure they usually use. . . . But around the floor there were little chunks of brittle grey stuff. Like this. . . ."

She fished in her blouse pocket and tugged out a shiny piece of stuff like extremely battered aluminium.

"Then I lifted Snoops up our shaft in the hope he would find you and bring you," she finished, handing the lump of stuff to me. She paused, eyed me curiously. "Think it might be the stuff we're looking for?"

I studied it intently and as I was doing so footsteps came crunching up and Randi appeared.

"Interesting, isn't it?" he asked slowly, squatting down. He glanced at Ann. "I heard most of what you had to say as I came up," he remarked. "Sound carries very well in this still air."

"Think this is what we're looking for?" I asked him, handing the lump over.

He studied it, shrugged, then stood up. With a sudden effort he heaved it an enormous distance. We all watched its flight—a terrific distance in the light gravity. . . . Then the three of us were abruptly lifted from the ground and pressed back hard against the rocks by the force of a colossal explosion. It looked as though the whole verdure filled valley rocked and swam under the stunning impact. *Flame Bugs* went swirling away like driven mist; the distant trees swayed and bent. Then all was still once more.

Very slowly I rose from shielding Ann. She was nearly crying with alarm. I noticed in that moment

that Randi was not over startled; he was looking towards the scene of the explosion with a dreamy expression on his face. I saw his thin hands clench momentarily at a passing thought.

"It is *Potassium*!" I exclaimed at last.

"Yes, it's *Potassium*," he agreed thoughtfully. "In other words, crystallised energy, stored up through millions of years. Release of natural forces."

"What the deuce are you talking about?" I demanded, scrambling up. "Are you trying to tell us you knew it would explode like that?"

"If it was *Potassium*—yes!"

"And—and I wandered about with that awful stuff in my pocket!" Ann gulped, suddenly shaking. "Lord, if I'd trodden on the stuff, or slipped or something— Oh, Clem, do you realise. . . !"

SHE did not finish her sentence: the thought was too awesome for her, though I decided the light pull of gravity would not make her doll-like weight very heavy on a piece of *Potassium* anyway.

"You see," Randi resumed, looking at us both, "I'm rather more of a scientist than you two think—and I also believe in turning Nature's efforts to good use if possible." He pointed to the ten-foot crater the stuff had created. "Look at that! From a piece the size of a Brazil nut! Imagine, then, a shell of *Potassium*, dropping in the middle of a civilised city. Nothing—absolutely nothing—could stand against it. Whoever owned such a power could dominate all nations by sheer force; could even dominate all planets, perhaps. . . ."

Ann gave a little gasp of alarm. "Vassy, whatever do you mean? You talk like a war monger—"

"I am!" he interrupted her, smiling coldly. Then, with lightning suddenness, he whipped his revolver from its holster, covered us both. Stupidly Ann and I raised our hands.

"We came to the Moon for fuel," Randi went on calmly. "And we have found it rather more quickly than I expected—thanks to Ann's fool blunderings with a butterfly net. As an explosive material for rockets *Potassium* certainly has no equal—but I'm not interested in rockets. I regard the stuff as a supreme war weapon!"

"You mean," I said slowly, "you're working for some foreign power?"

"Yes. You may have heard of a missing espionage agent—one Valon Kintroff? That is me! You see, my Government have ways and means of learning things. They found out that when Pye made his space record trip he was using hardly any fuel at all. Before he set out from Earth paid agents—in the form of mechanics and so forth—removed a small quantity of his fuel and sent it to our laboratories for analysis. It was found to possess an enormous amount of stored energy, released by the action of friction or heavy successive blows. A lump the size of a pea, as Pye told us, was quite

sufficient to drive him the 480,000 miles to the Moon and back. . . ."

"Then?" I demanded.

"I was assigned to learn all about the fuel—to obtain it by any possible means without exciting too much suspicion. As you know, the Space Patrol prevents us doing anything but legitimate business on any planet. No amount of bribery or corruption can get a paid agent into the Space Patrol. I could not, therefore, by any stretch of ingenuity, steal a concession from the Moon, nor could I import the necessary machinery. The only thing to do was to line up with somebody who had a legitimate purpose and then work things in my own way. I went to work, found out by devious means that Pye was prepared to sell his lunar concession, that its source was on the Moon here.

"I realised," Randi went on steadily, "that he would sell to the biggest company—the British Drew Corporation. So I struck up an apparently amorous acquaintance with you, Ann. Pye did as I'd hoped and I tried to get the concession to save further trouble. You outbid me, Ann, so I had to let you have it, but kept by you just the same. . . . All very simple, isn't it?"

I said savagely, "Are you fool enough to think you can get away with this, Randi? You—"

"I know I can," he assured me, unmoved. "Accidents on the Moon—death of a famous heiress and young space explorer. . . . Very easy. Oh, yes! Pye was the fly in the ointment. He did not suspect anything until I gather he heard something over the radio about a missing espionage agent—Kintroff. As you know, Pye was once in the Space Secret Service. He'd unfortunately seen my record photograph and had begun to recognise me. . . . When you two were asleep he came into my room and tried to get at the truth. We fought it out. He ended up through the emergency lock. . . . You see, of the two evils of him giving me away, and losing him and the exact location of *Potentium* I decided the latter was the lesser. Naturally, it was I who typed his suicide note. I remembered his outburst about war and kindred things. That seemed to me the perfect link between to provide motive."

"Then it *was* murder!" I burst out. "Why, you damned, rotten snake! I suspected it, but I couldn't prove it. . . ."

"Nor will you!" Randi grinned a little as I glared at him helplessly. Ann looked at me in bewilderment. Behind us Snoops snuffled impatiently.

"You know, Dixon, you're a bit of a fool," Randi commented. "If you were anything at all of a scientist—such as I am—you would have seen the possibilities in this fuel for yourself. Don't you see what has happened here on the Moon? The titanic craters and mountain ranges could possibly have been caused by volcanic and internal upheaval—but not probably. . . . Nature is ever expending her

force. Some of it passes away into space, some of it changes into invisible radiation—but quite a quantity of it is stored up in materials.

"Coal, for instance, discharges long accumulated solar energy. In the ultimate state of a world like this one, vast amounts of energy are liable to be stored up in the rocks themselves in a locked, potential form. The forces that blew these vast craters are no longer active—they're inert, awaiting powerful impact to release them. Just as coal seams will not burn until the coal is removed and placed on a fire. . . . That is the nature of this fuel—locked energy. A planet with great areas of its under-world holding enormous supplies of leashed force—*Potentium* as Pye so aptly called it. Control of that stuff—"

That was about the limit of what I could stand. Randi's sneering voice, his supercilious expression, his absolute belief in his mastery of the situation, did something to me. With an almost mechanical impulse I suddenly dropped my hands and charged forward. Against the lesser gravity I was on him in a second; his revolver went off and fell a few feet away. In the confusion I saw Ann pick it up gingerly.

Then Snoops joined in, lip drawn back over his fangs, his single eye blazing hatred. He had never liked Randi anyhow, and my sudden attack was sufficient to release his terrific temper.

I punched and pounded Randi with all the force I could muster, and that was a good deal with muscular power measuring so high—but in Randi I was dealing with a man of unsuspected strength. He was no boxer, but his wrestling holds were devastating. Before I knew what had happened I was underneath him with his steely fingers at my throat.

Snoops charged in with snarling muzzle, only to fly backwards as Randi lashed out his heavy boot. The blow hit Snoops clean on the head, stunned him completely with its violence. . . . That incident lent me added fury and I struggled again with the force of a maniac. Out of the tail of my eye I saw Ann dancing round frantically with the revolver butt foremost in her hand. Down it came, aimed unerringly at Randi—but at that moment my strugglings succeeded and I came uppermost to get the full force of the revolver blow on my left temple. I saw a soundless flash of white fire—

IV

A RUMBLING, beating roar sounded in my ears. The ground was shaking underneath me. Stiffly I twisted round and tried to bring up my hands to my aching head—but I could not. They were bound securely at my sides. In fact, my whole body was bound so tightly I could not even bend my knees.

For a moment I lay passive on rough stone, gazing at a remote lofty ceiling of rock, lighted by the eternal dancing of the *Flame Bugs*—and something else. A vast, distorted wavering shadow was cast

on the wall in front of me, the ragged outlines of a man, his head bent so that he was looking downwards.

I twisted round at that, and the first thing I beheld was Ann beside me, similarly bound. She flicked her eyes towards the figure of Randi standing some little distance away. The scene rather awed me for a moment—the vision of him staring down into some kind of crater, its creamy glow fanning upwards with the radiance of white hot fire. Scorching winds were swirling through the cavern, the deep, remote muffled boomings gave a little insight on the titanic battle of forces still being waged deep in the Moon's core, probably at the bottom of that colossal shaft.

"What happened?" I whispered, wishing my head did not ache so abominably.

"I'm—I'm sorry I hit you," she muttered. "It was a complete accident. He overpowered me in a moment, brought me down here, and then brought you as well. He tied us up together with his belt while he went to the ship and got some rope. . . . Funny thing, he saved a length of rope for something, and also brought a bottle of acid from our supplies."

"Acid!" I echoed, aghast.

My voice carried to Randi. He turned and came slowly forward, smiling complacently.

"So you've recovered, eh, Dixon?" he murmured. "And you're wondering about my acid bottle, eh? Well, you'll soon see its purpose. At least I shall be able to spare myself the thought that I ill-treated either of you. It will be so swift—so sudden—that there can be no suggestion of lingering pain. . . . However, first there is work to be done."

He turned and moved swiftly out of the cavern. The moment he had gone I set to work on my ropes. Ann and I sat back to back and worked with desperate energy, she pulling at my knots and I at hers—but we might as well have tried to open the Bank of England with a toothpick for all we accomplished. Those knots were so damned tight it would take hours to unfasten them working under such conditions.

The idea of rubbing the rope against a stone was ruled out, too, in case we happened to choose a piece of *Potentium* and the friction would blow us to infinity.

So by the time Randi came back we were pretty exhausted. He had only that same fixed smile on his sallow face. With him he had brought four ordinary metal chests from the ship, carefully lined with cotton wool and waste rags. Ann and I watched in silence as he moved about the cavern, picking up grey metallic hunks of the explosive rock and laying them with gentle care in the boxes, taking supreme pains to wrap up each piece separately. As each box became full he departed with

it, walking on tip-toe to avoid all chance of jarring—and thanks to his precautions and the slight gravity he got all his boxes full and removed them, presumably to the ship.

Then he came back with three strong poles, which he proceeded to erect with significant silence in the cavern's centre. By the time he had finished he had a stand like a camp-fire tripod with a massive hunk of rock suspended from the centre by the surplus length of rope. He regarded it like an artist finishing his masterpiece, glanced at us amusedly, then searched round until he found a large, odd piece of *Potentium*. Carefully he placed it on the floor directly under the suspended rock.

"I wonder," he said musingly, turning to us, "if I need to explain the meaning of this?"

"You know damned well you don't!" I shouted. "If this is your idea of fighting for your country you've some mighty foul ideas! Why can't you and I fight it out? Leave Ann out of it! She——"

"She knows everything, like you," he sighed. "That's what makes it so awkward. You see, this piece of rock is large enough to weigh pretty heavy even in this gravity. Now, if I sprinkle nitric acid on the supporting rope it will rapidly eat through it. Down comes the rock, explodes the *Potentium* underneath, and——! Well, I can imagine myself reporting a tragic lunar accident in which two well known people lost their lives! And I have three crates full of *Potentium*, enough to make bombs to blow all enemy civilisations from the face of the Earth.

"Then, in the future, I may return here with others. This cave will assuredly be blasted to dust, but not all traces of *Potentium* will vanish from the Moon. I shall dig for it again, be the heir to it, because it was your dying wish, Ann, that it should be so."

"You—you can't do this thing, Vassy!" she cried tearfully, writhing her bound body. "You just can't——"

"Who's going to believe you, anyway?" I broke in hotly. "You'll be brought up by the Drew Corporation and made to explain."

"Which I shall, very satisfactorily," he smiled. "You see, Ann, you made the entire lunar concession over to me. It was your dying wish!"

"I—I didn't! It—it isn't!" she stammered despairingly; then she took refuge in tears. I lay glaring up at Randi.

"What in hell are you talking about?" I snapped out. "You've got no authority to jump this claim and never will have!"

FOR answer he tugged out a sheet of paper from his pocket and held it up for us to see. Both Ann and I stared in speechless amazement at a statement in Randi's handwriting that the entire concession and formula were under his control. That was plain enough, but the extraordinary part about it was

Ann's unmistakable flowing signature at the end of the epistle!

"It is not a forgery," Randi stated drily.

"But—but how——" Ann gasped, stupefied. "That's my signature, yes. Even my bank manager would swear to it. But——"

"A little game of 'Give and take,'" Randi explained, refolding the paper. He smiled. "You remember how we played it on the journey here? I believe I won an imaginary continent from you. In accordance with the rules of the game you gave me your signature for it, just as an I.O.U. I wrote the statement of the game debt at the top of the sheet and you signed at the bottom. To you it was a game of fun—to me a game of very grim reality. I had merely to tear the top off the sheet and substitute these other vital words underneath. . . . Need I remind you that the Expeditionary Clause in the new Space Law makes it legal—as in the constantly existent case of a soldier or man or woman on active service—for a dying person on an expedition to make a last will without the presence of witnesses, provided the signature is approved by experts. . . ?"

"Why, you infernal swine!" I yelled. "You dared do that? Is there nothing safe from your slimy fingers? And if you wanted to kill us why resort to this? You killed Pye without compunction: what stopped you on our account?"

"Well, I wanted to be sure that *Potentium* could be found first, otherwise my accident tale and false concession would have been useless and I'd have found myself in difficulties. But as it is——"

He shrugged and turned aside, pulled a bottle from his pocket. Ann and I could only watch helplessly as an oily, corrosive fluid poured from the bottle on to the rope suspending the improvised piledriver. At the finish of his performance Randi threw the bottle away with a flourish, regarded the wisping smoke already rising from the rope into the perpetually agitated air.

"I should estimate . . . about fifteen minutes," he commented, glancing at his watch. "That will give me ample time to get away from the Moon into space—and I have an idea that the Moon's surface will change a deal in the upheaval, enough, anyhow, to substantiate my story of an accident. Later, even, your bodies may be found." He stopped and regarded us. "It has been nice knowing you—and I apologise for these final melodramatics," he murmured, then he went softly from the cavern and vanished in the outlet tunnel beyond.

IT SEEMED that Ann and I lay gazing for an eternity at that gently smoking rope before the full horror of our predicament hammered in upon us—then we both started to thresh and struggle with desperate energy, straining and struggling until the skin round our wrist ropes was broken and bleeding.

Disturbed by our activities, one or two of the

Diggers came out of the warm shadows. I called to them as a last desperate measure. If only I could get them to work they'd drill through the ropes in a moment, but all the little devils did was sit like rats and watch us, basking in the warmth from the central crater shaft.

"No go!" I panted at last. "They haven't the brains to know what I mean. We'll have to try rolling out of here——"

"No—no! Wait!" Ann screamed. "You can't pick your way like you can when walking. There are bits of *Potentium* all over the floor. If your weight crushes one of them we'll go sky high."

"And what do you think we'll do when that blasted rock drops?" I demanded desperately. "This is the lesser of two evils—come on!" and I started rolling with frantic speed, digging my bound heels into the floor to help me along. I could not have stood upright anyhow: I was too tightly bound for that.

Little by little I edged my way along, moving towards the *Potentium* under the tripod in the hope that I might be able to somehow push it away. But the distance! It seemed like hundreds of miles. . . . And suddenly the rock swayed ever so slightly as one strand of the rope parted smokingly!

"Clem, it's going!" Ann screeched. "It's going!"

"Keep rolling!" I ordered, and made myself sound savage to stop her going hysterical—though I knew it did not matter much anyway. The rate I was going at I would never reach the thing in time. . . .

Then, half way in a roll, I stopped at a sudden sound down the outlet tunnel. A second later Snoops came into view, limping badly, blood dripping from a battered jaw, a deep gash across his skull where the fur had been torn away. I stared at him in momentary horror. In the intensity of the moment I had forgotten all about him.

"He's hurt!" Ann cried. "Look, he's bleeding——"

"Come here, Snoops!" I ordered sharply, making motions with my body. "Bite! In God's name, animal—bite!"

Bite! That was the last thing the affectionate old fool did! He lay down, plainly exhausted, and licked my hand languidly. I felt the warm drip of blood drops from his jaw as he performed the action.

"Bite!" I screamed, flying into sudden fury. "Dammit, Snoops—bite!"

He licked my bound right hand again, more affectionately than ever—and also more wearily. I could not understand how he had got into such a state, why he had been so long coming. Unless that devil Randi——!

Then my thoughts were interrupted by a violent commotion in the shadows. Like a sudden tide, a mass of *Diggers* came swarming into view, eyes glinting fiendishly, their terrible drilling muzzles pro-

jected for action. Ann and I watched in blank horror as they swept towards us—but they left her alone entirely and instead plunged for me!

Exhausted though he was, Snoops was on his feet again instantly, snarling defensively, and this time there was nothing I could do to save matters. Fighting began immediately—a swearing, snapping mass swarming about the cave, piling thick and fast on to poor old Snoops until he went down with a crash. . . . But I noticed something else too. Savagely sharp drills were boring into my right hand, through the rope that pinioned it. Almost before I realised what was happening my hand was free!

"It's the blood—Snoops' blood!" Ann shouted wildly, staring at me. "In that other fight the same thing happened—when it got on your clothes, remember? It's on your ropes. . . . The *Diggers* were attracted by it. . . ." She got no further, collapsed in her ropes, utterly overcome.

I did not wait to ask whys and wherefores. I hurled off the remaining *Diggers*, ripped my hand free, tugged out my left arm from the loosened rope, then dragged myself as fast as I could go along the cavern floor, fell flat by the tripod.

With infinite care I dragged out the *Potentium* from beneath. Hardly had I pushed it to a safe distance than the supported rock came down with a bang that made a dent in the soft floor and sent dust swirling in all directions. . . .

I was shaking with reaction, had to lie prone to still my slamming heart and pulses. Then at last I was calmer, tore the remaining ropes from my body and released Ann, raised her in my arms.

I was glad she did not see the carnage I was forced to gaze upon—the swarming masses of *Diggers* over the lacerated corpse of poor old Snoops. I knew in those moments that I could give no aid.

Slowly I went out of the cavern.

AS I neared the surface opening Ann recovered again, but I still carried her. Without saying anything, I lifted her up to the rim of the surface hole and she scrambled outside. With greater height to my stature I got out without assistance, just as Randi must have done.

"Even though we've got out of that mess we're not much better off," Ann remarked moodily, gazing at the blue-black sky. "I don't see the ship anywhere up there, so I suppose he's gone. . . . Taken all the drilling apparatus too," she went on, surveying the deserted space. Then she looked at me quickly. "Incidentally, where's Snoops? We must have left him below—"

"For good," I told her soberly. "Anyhow, he died being loyal."

We began to walk aimlessly; then she said, "Well, I was right about the blood on your rope attracting the *Diggers* anyway. They and Snoops were sworn enemies—" She broke off, stopped walking.

"Look!" she cried in amazement, as we turned

the corner of the rock which gave access to the main valley side.

I saw instantly what she meant. Our ship was where it had been all the time—but that was not the main point. I raced forward in long leaps to land beside the sprawling body of a man—Vaston Randi! Ann turned away with a little shudder as I turned him over. Just for the moment I felt pretty squeamish too. His neck was lacerated mercilessly from ear to ear. Across his face were the unmistakable marks of canine teeth. . . . Gently I let him fall back on the crimson stained dust.

"Snoops!" I breathed, suddenly understanding. "Ann, don't you realise—? That was why Snoops was so long in joining us. He hated Randi: he hated him more after he stunned him so violently. He must have waited his chance and then sprung—probably from this rock here. And he made no mistake—got the jugular vein. . . ."

"But Randi made a lot of trips," Ann reminded me. "Why did Snoops choose the last trip of all?"

I shrugged. "Probably because he was still unconscious during the interval and only recovered as Randi made his last trip to the ship. That accounts for Snoops' condition. There must have been the hell of a fight. . . ."

She nodded very slowly, gripped my arm in eloquent silence as we turned towards the space ship.

AT LEAST Randi had guessed right in one thing—his belief in the potency of *Potentium*. When we got back to Earth and had the stuff analysed and formulated according to Pye's methods we adopted Randi's own scheme and had a considerable amount of the raw stuff made into bombs.

Then, purely as a matter of defence, we demonstrated the bombs' efficiency to a world council of war. The result was instantaneous! Approaching hostilities were tempered; bickering slackened off. No nation could afford to tackle such a supremely destructive weapon. The threat of war vanished—but in the laboratories of the Drew Space Corporation there still remains enough substance in the raw state to blow to atoms any nation that dares break the World Peace Pact of 1994.

To-day, of course, the Moon is entirely under the control of the Drew Concessionaires. The stuff is mined by trusted experts and used for peace time super fuel. . . . None without absolute authority may venture near that lunar storehouse.

Ann has gained more sense since her experiences—but there are times when we both wonder, during the all too slack intervals of our busy married life, how much of this power and peace would have come about but for the supreme loyalty of an ugly, one-eyed mass of fur from the swamps of far away Venus.

THE END

PACIFICON

An account of America's fourth national science fiction convention

By FORREST J. ACKERMAN

PLANNED for 1942 but delayed through the intervention of war, Los Angeles, California, staged America's fourth national science fiction convention from July 4th to 7th. Previous annual meetings had been held at New York, Chicago and Denver, and the Pacific coast fantasy enthusiasts had to work hard in preparing a spectacular programme to outvie the 1939-40-41 gatherings. Like its predecessors the Convention was a four-day Open House for every fantasy enthusiast who could make the trip west, packed with interesting discussions, talks, films, recordings, exhibitions, personalities, and the two main high-lights—the futuristic costume ball and the annual dinner.

Although publicity and planning had been continued to a certain extent during the war years, it was not until after V-J day that the planning committee could finally go ahead with their work. On two occasions committee members were interviewed on radio programmes (one on a National hook-up), which helped publicise the Pacificon, as the convention was termed. The Committee produced an elaborate pre-Convention booklet giving the fullest information and advice to prospective participants and a sub-Committee was set up to cover all the arrival points in Los Angeles and meet Conventioneers as they reached the city.

Some 125 people travelled from all corners of the U.S. to attend this futuristic-minded gathering: one family man hitch-hiked across the entire continent from Massachusetts; a housewife in North Carolina took a marital holiday to participate; Robert Bloch, one of America's foremost fantasy authors, arrived by plane from Milwaukee. There were also representatives from practically every publishing house who produce professional fantasy magazines.

FOLLOWING a custom which seems likely to become established permanently, the Convention had as guests of honour two of America's top-flight fantasy authors—this year A. E. van Vogt, whose fiction during the recent years has been acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic, and Mrs. van Vogt, better known by her fiction writing name of E. Mayne Hull. Mr. van Vogt delivered a dynamic hour's speech entitled "Tomorrow On The March."

The main meetings of the four-day Convention were held in a luxurious hall equipped with microphones and broadcasting unit—there was even a roving microphone for conventioneers to "answer

back" at the speakers on the rostrum. During the proceedings there was an auction of rare fantasy books, original magazine illustrations and other collectors' items, and a special stir was caused by the placing on sale of a limited quantity of the first issue of *New Worlds*, the magazine being avidly purchased by American science fiction fans.

A nuclear scientist lectured as technicolour films were shown of the first two atom-bombings and a subscription was taken up to aid the Einstein Atomic Movement. A Ronald Colman recording of H.P. Lovecraft's "Dunwich Horror" (from the "Not At Night" book series), was played over the broadcasting unit. On another occasion the prehistoric spectacle "One Million B.C." was shown.

Outstanding were the masquerade ball, at which participants vied for prizes in such elaborate home-made costumes as a spaceman of the 22nd Century, the Frankenstein monster, a Venusian princess, Dracula's daughter, and a Wellsian character from "Things To Come"; and the formal banquet at which conventioneers heard favourite authors reveal intimate anecdotes connected with their lives and writings.

MOST far-reaching single accomplishment of the Convention was the formation of the Fantasy Foundation—a plan put before the meeting for the creation of a master library of science fiction—a fantasy museum—a repository of all imaginative literature and associated items, which was enthusiastically accepted, with sums of money being subscribed by those present for operational expenses. One leading fantasy enthusiast, inspirator of the project, bequeathed the Foundation \$1000 upon his demise as well as his entire personal collection of some 1300 books and 1400 magazines.

In 1947 Americans plan to hold their Convention in Philadelphia.

British readers and fantasy enthusiasts will no doubt be surprised at the extent to which Americans are organised where their favourite literature is concerned—even the Press give favourable reports of such meetings—the reason is probably due to the fact that America has had a number of regular magazines devoted to futuristic fiction for many years, while Britain although producing many fine fantasy books, has had few home products in the fantasy magazine field. The magazines help to bind readers into closer contact. *New Worlds*, therefore, should do a lot towards furthering the ideals of Britons.



FOREIGN BODY

By JOHN BRODY

*If Earth has ever been visited by extra-terrestrial travellers,
where's the logical place to find traces—or even their space ship?*

THUD! . . . Thud! Thud! . . . Thud!

"One more!" Steve said, and the group waited, tense, impatient.

Thud!

"That's the lot!" The five men started off along the gallery towards the coal face.

Steve was leading. He stopped so suddenly that his butt cannoned into his back with a force that made him grunt.

"Look!" Steve said, and his voice was a mixture of amazement and awe. The four men crowded forward to look over his shoulder and round his broad back. There were four separate, distinct gasps, and then a flow of profanity.

"Jees! Get the foreman!"

Five minutes later, "The Devil! Get the under manager!"

Ten minutes later, "Good Lord! Get the manager!"

In twenty minutes the great man was at the coal face, with Pete Service, mine engineer, at his heels. They stared, gasped, and wondered.

The charges had blown away a considerable stretch of the coal face. Sticking out of the mass

of coal and rock rubble was what, at first glance, seemed remarkably like the business end of a Spitfire! Whatever it was, it was formed out of a metal that gleamed red in the light of the lamps.

"What the blazes. . . !" Jenkins, the manager, began, and then the words stopped coming. He motioned his engineer forward.

Pete Service stepped in closer. His experienced eyes at once detected that the foreign body was firmly embedded in the coal—and had been for a heck of a long time! Fragments of coal blasted by the charge were curved to fit the cone-shaped body exactly. The metal cone was as much part and parcel of the coal-seam as the fossilised anchorites!

"What the devil is it?" Jenkins barked.

"God knows!" Pete replied. He was very puzzled. "We must see how far back it goes. Any more charges down here?"

In a few minutes drilling began and charges were laid. Working at high pressure, the colliers uncovered more of the cone. Soon they had six foot of it sticking out; it grew to a diameter of nine feet, and still they had not got to the end of its length.

IN the meantime, Pete had tried to discover what it was made of. Metal, yes; an alloy, but unbelievably hard. Drills, hacksaws, bounced off its red exterior. A yell checked Pete in his examination.

Seven feet from the tip of the cone, a collier had found a variation of the metal surface. There was a round porthole, filled with a translucent substance that had a faint blue coloration. The moment Pete laid eyes on it, he had a hunch; it was fantastic, of course, but nevertheless, it took possession of his mind. He made his way back to the surface.

"Listen, chief!" he said to Jenkins. "This is something big—biggest thing yet! I'm still hazy about what exactly we've got down there, but if it turns out to be what I think it is, this little pit is going to be world famous in twenty-four hours. I suggest you call a board meeting, just to get things straight with the directors, and then get on to—Hell, I can't think just who might be called an authority on space travel!"

For twenty-four hours the colliers worked as never before, urged on by horrible threats from Pete. Blasting, cutting, shovelling, they gouged their way into the coal face. Twenty-five and a half hours after the initial discovery, Pete made his way to the surface to report to a meeting of the directors.

He burst into the board room in his filthy pit clothes. Sir Herbert, the chairman, frowned at the intrusion.

"Well, young man," he said pompously, "We shall excuse your appearance. Can you now tell us what this . . . er . . . foreign body is?"

Steve took a deep breath. "Gentlemen," he began, anticipating the storm. "I have every reason to believe the 'foreign body' to be no less than a space-ship from another planet—perhaps from another solar system!"

There was an expressive silence. Sir Herbert looked at Mr. Carter. Colonel Hunt looked at Mr. Crosby. Mr. Jenkins, the manager, went red. At last Sir Herbert spoke:

"Come, come, young man," he said, and it was obvious that he was choosing his words carefully. "We mustn't let our imaginations run away with us. What you've just said appears to this board as a little—I must say it, Mr. Service; a little idiotic!"

"I heartily agree with you, sir!" Steve replied, grinning broadly. "I'd go further, if I may. What I've just said must appear to you to be evidence of my lunacy! But if any of you gentlemen care to put off your morning coats and come underground with me, you shall see for yourselves."

Jenkins, ever the peacemaker, leant forward. "Tell the Board a little more about the thing, Service," he said. Pete blessed him for the opportunity.

"Well, gentlemen, this 'foreign body,'" he began, "is some sixty feet long. It is shaped like a very fat cigar, and is about twenty feet in diameter at its widest section. . . ."

"What's it made of?" Mr. Carter put in.

"An alloy that has a distinctive red colour and is unbelievably strong. We've tried drilling, cutting, blasting, but we can't even dent it. But to continue. There are four portholes on each side, filled with a bluish, translucent material. At the blunt end are four tubes, presumably part of a propulsion unit. There are four smaller tubes arranged radially near the bows. These, I think, are stabilisers. There is a flush-fitting metal door on one side, opened by a countersunk wheel. We've tried the door, and it will open."

"Have you been inside?" Colonel Hunt barked.

"No, sir. I reasoned that the atmosphere within—if there is any—may be different—even poisonous—to our own. I've ordered three oxygen outfits to be taken down, and I intend to enter the ship as soon as I leave this meeting. Perhaps three of you gentlemen might wish to accompany me?" There was a long silence.

Sir Herbert asserted himself. "There's one thing you haven't explained, young man!" he grunted. "How the blazes did this thing get down a coal mine?"

"There is only one explanation, sir, so far as I can see. This space ship comes from beyond this planet; perhaps from Mars or Venus; perhaps even from Ursa Major or the Dog Star. Many thousands of years ago, the home planet of this ship had already reached a stage of scientific advancement years in advance of our own. This space ship was sent out for some reason, and crashed on our world, amid the huge sub-tropical forests. The crew were killed, but the ship was undamaged. For thousands of years she lay there amid the trees, gradually becoming buried amid the vegetation. The trees became coal, but the strength of the alloy of which the ship is made, stood up to the colossal pressures, and became part of the coal seam. That's my guess, gentlemen, and I think it's the only one possible!"

AN hour later, Pete and Colonel Hunt strapped the oxygen apparatus on their backs and placed the masks over their noses. The Colonel was the only member of the Board to volunteer for the investigation. Sir Herbert suddenly remembered that he must ring up the British Museum and get an expert sent down. Mr. Carter considered himself too old to go down the pit, and Mr. Jenkins felt he might be needed outside the space-ship. Mr. Crosby had gone to ring up the *Daily Trumpet*.

"Ready, sir?" Pete's voice was strongly nasal.

"Lead on, young fellow!" the colonel replied, and a collier began to rotate the wheel that operated the locks.

The door opened easily; Pete noticed that there were four bolts inside, but none of them had been shot. Within was a dark chamber about five feet square. The outer door slammed shut, and Pete searched for the inner door to the air-lock.

He found a smaller, circular door, and his powerful lamp revealed that it was already open. As Pete stepped forward to push through, he stumbled over something on the floor. It was the body of one of the crew—Pete paused a moment for an examination.

The shrivelled, leathery form was about five feet long, and formed into three sections—a head, a long pear-shaped torso, and a lower torso about eighteen inches long and cylindrical in shape. From the upper torso there extended four pairs of limbs. The two most forward ones ended in tiny hands, each with eight fingers. The second pair of limbs ended in bony hooks. The third and fourth pairs ended in what might have been feet, though the toes were well developed and might have been used as additional hands.

Pete noted that there were four eyes, giving the creature all-round vision. In addition there were two bunches of antennae mounted on either side of the head. The head seemed to house the main nerve centre or brain, but there were neither ears, nose, nor mouth to be seen. In general, the creature resembled an immense ant.

Pete left the body, and passed through the door into what he guessed at once to be the control chamber. It consisted of the whole of the fore end of the ship, except that there was a level floor and the actual bows were hidden by a screen some five feet square. The walls were covered with pipes, wires, dials, knobs and buttons. Instead of a control seat, there was a number of rubber cushions on the floor, shaped with rounded ridges and depressions, that must have conformed to the bodies of the creatures in their recumbent positions.

There were two other bodies in the control room. The cause of death was not apparent. Certainly they did not seem to have died by violence. Suffocation occurred to Pete as the probable cause of death.

The screen at the fore end of the ship was next examined. It was of some material that resembled frosted glass, and behind it Pete could see a maze of wires that lead in the general direction of a metal case near the control position. He slipped the catches on the case and it swung open to reveal an immense radio set. In general, it was similar to many that Pete had seen, but the valves were long tubes stretching from top to bottom of the case, and instead of being silvered, they were coated internally with some bright green substance.

Pete and the Colonel next went to the engine room, passing back by a narrow cat-walk that traversed a series of big tanks. The engine room, at the rear of the ship was remarkably bare of mechanical adornments. Four tubes, each eighteen inches in diameter, projected into the room, the after-parts of the four propulsion units that Pete had noticed when outside. At the breach end of each tube there was a swelling. A pipe led into the swelling, and

Pete traced these pipes back to the tanks under the cat-walk. Whatever the device that caused the propulsion of the ship, it seemed to be remarkably simple. Pete deduced that the secret must lie in the fuel, and turned his attention to the fuel tanks.

He had some difficulty in discovering any means of determining whether the fuel tanks were filled, and if so how they had been filled. At last, after crawling on his hands and knees almost the whole length of the bottom of the ship, he found a filler cap; screwing it off, he discovered that two at least of the tanks were half filled with fluid.

He and the Colonel had been in the ship for nearly two hours. Pete decided it was time to go to the surface and report. However, passing through the control room again, he could not resist a final peep into a metal cupboard that he nearly bumped his head on. In the cupboard were stacks of small cubes, each little more than an inch square, and made of a substance that resembled cloudy, blue quartz. Steve picked one up and quickly slipped it in his pocket.

OUTSIDE he found Jenkins reluctantly putting on oxygen apparatus with the object of organising a search party.

"Thank goodness you've got out all right," he gasped. "We were just beginning to think you were done for. What did you find?"

"Enough to change the whole scientific picture!" Pete said, slipping out of his oxygen kit. "Look here, Jenkins, I want to get up top and make a report. The things in that machine are unbelievable!!"

"Unbelievable!" the Colonel echoed, and that seemed about all he *could* say.

"But there's one thing, Jenks. Nobody must go into the ship—nobody! The tanks are half-filled with fuel, everything is just as it was when the bus landed. Some damn fool might press the wrong button and destroy the whole box of tricks. Can you arrange that no one goes near it?" Jenks promised that he would do what he could, and the Colonel and the Engineer returned to the surface.

The Board assembled to hear the report. "There was a reporter from the *Daily Trumpet* in attendance, and a learned professor despatched by the British Museum. Briefly, Pete told of what he had seen, and the Colonel made confirmatory grunts at the right moment.

"In conclusion, gentlemen," Pete wound up, "I think it absolutely safe to assume that the 'foreign body' is a space ship, probably from another solar system. The occupants, ambassadors from this other world, seem to be of insect form, and highly civilised. Their scientific achievements put those of this world very much in the shade."

"It's incredible," the man from the British Museum muttered. "I really must see it before I hazard an opinion."

"Can we get it to the surface?" Sir Herbert said, "I mean, it's definitely going to hold up production if we have hundreds of scientists dashing in and out of the pit for the next few months."

"It can't be moved as it is," Pete said. "It will have to be sectioned, brought up, and reassembled. We can't begin to do that until we discover how to cut the metal of which the thing is made. After standing up to the pressures that frame has, I think it's going to be a bit of a problem."

"These creatures . . ." the reporter began, and the violent ringing of an alarm bell cut his question short. Somewhere a hooter gave out a series of painful hoots. People outside the board room began to shout.

"Good Lord!" Pete cried, and it was the voice of human agony. He raced from the room like a madman. He took one look at the pit-head, and knew the worst. Clouds of black smoke were billowing round the pit gear.

HE covered the distance to the pit-head in record time. A rescue squad was forming up; instinctively, Pete knew their task to be hopeless. He turned away, helpless, momentarily broken; Sir Herbert panted up, gasping for breath.

"What's happened! What's happened?" he cried.

Pete turned to him. "The worst, sir," he said. "No one will get out of the workings alive. I was a fool, an utter fool. I knew someone would get into the space ship; I told Jenkins to keep them out, but he must've failed. Perhaps he got in himself."

"Yes, yes! But what could he do?"

"Fiddled about. Pressed one of the buttons and set the propulsion units off—the fuel tanks were half full. The jets blasting away in that confined space would burn up every man in a flash. Probably set the coal alight—fuse the ship into a solid mass of metal."

"A pit fire?" Sir Herbert cried, thinking of his profits.

"A pit fire," Pete echoed. The remainder of the directors crowded around them. The smoke billowed up, black, pitch-thick. Pete thought of the space-ship, and wept.

The man from the *Trumpet* elbowed up to Pete. "D'you think there'll be anything left of this space ship of yours?" he asked.

"Nothing," Pete said, tonelessly.

"So we'll never know if it really existed!" the expert from the British Museum said.

"What the blazes do you mean?" Pete said angrily. Then suddenly he remembered something. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the little cube he had picked up on the space ship. "So you don't think the space ship existed?" he said slowly. "Well, just take this in your hand."

The expert looked at the cube. "What does that cube of plastic prove?" he said sarcastically.

"Take it in your hand!" Pete held it out.

The expert put out his fingers and picked the cube up. With a gasp, he dropped it. Collecting his wits, he picked it up again, and stood in the centre of the circle, a look of amazement written on his face.

"Amazing!" he commented.

"What is it?" Sir Herbert demanded.

"This cube has impressed upon it the thought-information relating to the relative positions of the planets in our solar system. When you touch it, the relevant information at once leaps into your mind. How many of these cubes were there?"

"Hundreds," Pete answered. "I suppose they covered every bit of information that the space men required for navigation of their ship. Well, are you convinced?"

"Completely!" the expert replied. "Good Lord, what a tragic, irreparable loss to humanity!"

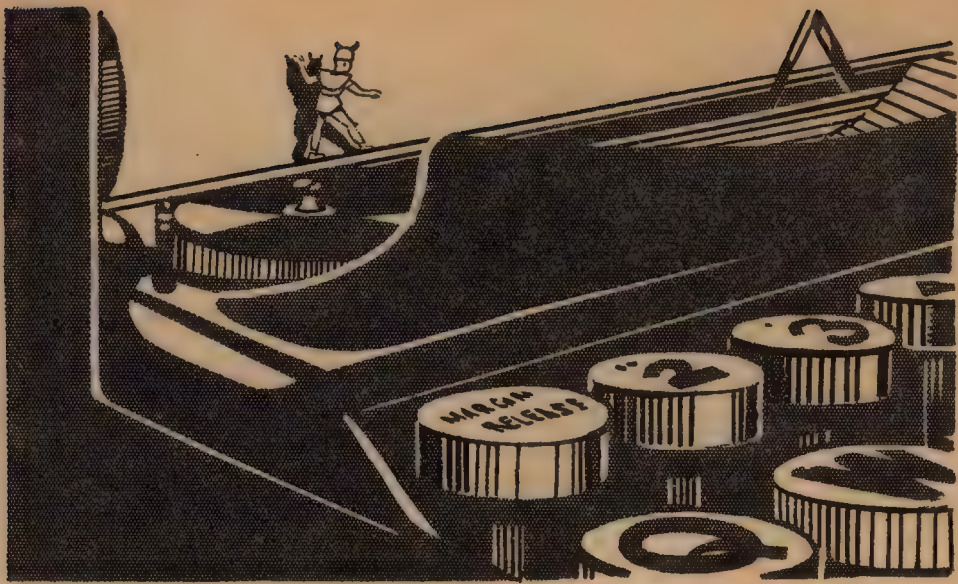
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THE MICRO MAN

By ALDEN LORRAINE

*Out of a micro world the little man came, into
the land of the Gods—but the Gods were careless.*

THE early morning street-car, swaying and rattling along its tracks, did as much to avert my attention from the book I was reading as the contents of the book itself. I didn't like Plato. Comfortable though the seat was, I was as uncomfortable as any collegiate could be whose mind would rather dwell upon to-morrow's football game than the immediate task in hand—the morning session with Professor Rednitz and the book on my lap.

My gaze wandered from the book and drifted out the distorted window, then fell to the car-sill as I thought over Plato's conclusions. Something moving on the ledge attracted my attention: it was a scurrying black ant. If I had thought about it, I might have wondered how it came there. But the next moment a more curious object on the sill caught my eye. I bent over.

I couldn't make out what it was at first. A bug, perhaps. Maybe it was too small for a bug. Just a little dancing dust, no doubt.

Then I discerned—and gasped. On the sill, there—it was a man! A man on the street-car's window sill—a *little* man! He was so tiny I

would never have seen him if it hadn't been for his white attire, which made him visible against the brown grain of the shellacked wood. I watched, amazed as his microscopic figure moved over perhaps half an inch.

He wore a blouse and shorts, it seemed, and sandals. Something might have been hanging at his side, but it was too small for me to make out plainly. His head, I thought, was silver-coloured, and I think the headgear had some sort of knobs on it. All this, of course, I didn't catch at the time, because my heart was hammering away excitedly and making my fingers shake as I fumbled for a matchbox in my pocket. I pushed it open upside-down and let the matches scatter out. Then, as gently as my excitement would allow, I pushed the tiny man from the ledge into the box; for I had suddenly realised the greatness of this amazing discovery.

The car was barely half-filled and no attention had been directed my way. I slid quickly out of the empty seat and hurriedly alighted at the next stop.

In a daze, I stood where I alighted waiting for the

next No. 10 that would return me home, the matchbox held tightly in my hand. They'd put that box in a museum one day!

I collect stamps—I've heard about getting rare ones with inverted centres, or the colours mixed up, or some dot extra or missing that made them immensely valuable. I'd imagined getting one by mistake sometime—rich! But this! That's right: there'd been that fantastic film once. "King Kong." About a monster prehistoric ape. It had packed a giant auditorium in New York—something like \$25 a seat. They'd billed him as "The Eighth Wonder of the World." But that was only imaginary, and . . . a terrifying thought crossed my mind. I pushed open the box hastily: maybe I had been dreaming. But there it was—the unbelievable; the Little Man!

A car was before me, just leaving. Its polished surface had not reflected through the haze, and the new design made so little noise. I hadn't seen it, but now recognised it as mine and jumped for it. My mind was in such a turmoil that the conductor had to ask three times for my fare. Ordinarily, I would have been embarrassed, but a young man with his mind on millions doesn't worry about little things like that. At least, not this young man.

How I looked on the street-car, or what I did, or how I traversed the five blocks from the end of the line, I couldn't say. If I may imagine myself, though, I must have strode along the street toward home like a determined machine. Straight along the pavement, looking neither to right nor left, until I was at the garage door. I remember from there on.

I let myself into the basement. Inside, I pulled the shades together and closed the door, the matchbox still in my hand. No one was at home this time of day, which pleased me particularly, for I wanted to figure out how I was going to present this wonder to the world.

I flung myself down on the bed and opened the matchbox. The little man lay still on the bottom.

"Little Man!" I cried, and turned him out on the quilt. Maybe he had suffocated in the box. Irrational thought! Small though it might be to me, the little box was as big as all outdoors to him. It was the bumping about he'd endured, for I hadn't been very thoughtful of him.

He was reviving now, and raised himself on one arm. I pushed myself off the bed, and stepped quickly to my table to procure something I could control him with. Not that he could get away, but he was so tiny I thought I might lose sight of him.

Pen, pencil, paper, stamps, scissors, clips—none of them were what I wanted. I had nothing definite in mind, but then remembered my stamp outfit and rushed to secure it. Evidently college work had cramped my style along the collecting line, for the tweezers and magnifier appeared with a mild coating of dust. But they were what I needed, and I blew on them and returned to the bed.

The little man had made his way half an inch or so from his former prison; was crawling over what I suppose were, to him, great wrinkled blocks of red and green and black moss.

He crossed from a red into a black patch as I watched his movements through the glass and I could see him more plainly against the darker background. He stopped and picked at the substance of his strange surroundings, then straightened to examine a tuft of the cloth. The magnifier enlarged him to a seeming half inch or so, and I could see better, now, this strange creature of extraordinary stature.

It was a metal cap he wore, and it did have protruding knobs—two of them—slanting at 45 degree angles from his temples like horns. I wondered at their use, but it was impossible for me to imagine. Perhaps they covered some actual growth; he might have had real horns for all I knew. Nothing would have been too strange to expect.

His clothing showed up as a simple, white, two-piece garment; like a shirt and gym shorts. The shorts were cut off at the knee, and from there down he was bare except for a covering on his feet which appeared more like gloves than shoes. Whatever he wore to protect his feet, it allowed free movement of his toes.

It struck me that this little man's native habitat must have been very warm. His attire suggested this. For a moment I considered plugging in my small heater; my room certainly had no tropical or sub-tropical temperature at that time of the morning—and how was I know whether he shivered when he felt chill. Maybe he blew his horns. Anyway, I figured a living Eighth Wonder would be more valuable than a dead one; and I didn't think he could be stuffed. But somehow I forgot it in my interest in examining this unusual personage.

The little man had dropped the cloth now, and was staring in my direction. Of course, "my direction" was very general to him; but at least he seemed to be conscious of me. He certainly impressed me as being awfully different, but what his reactions were, I didn't know.

But someone else knew.

IN a world deep down in Smallness, in an electron of a dead cell of a wood killed by processing, five scientists were grouped before a complicated instrument with a horn like the early radios. Two sat and three stood, but their attention upon the apparatus was unanimous. From small hollowed cups worn on their fingers like rings, came a smoke from burning incense. These cups they held to their noses frequently, and their eyes shone as they inhaled. The scientists of infra-smallness were smoking.

With the exception of a recent prolonged silence, which was causing them great anxiety, sounds had been issuing from the instrument for days. There

had been breaks before, but this silence had been long-ensuing.

Now the voice was speaking again; a voice that was a telepathic communication made audible. The scientists brightened.

"There is much that I cannot understand," it came. The words were hesitant, filled with awe. "I seem to have been in many worlds. At the completion of my experiment, I stood on a land brown and black and very rough of surface. With startling suddenness, I was propelled across this harsh country, and terrifyingly I was falling. I must have dropped seventy-five feet, but the strange atmosphere of this great world saved me with its buoyancy.

"My new surroundings were grey and gloomy, and the earth trembled as a giant cloud passed over the sky. I do not know what it meant, but with the suddenness characteristic of this place, it became very dark, and an inexplicable violence shook me into insensibility.

"I am conscious, now, of some giant form before me, but it is so colossal that my eyes cannot focus it. And it changes. Now I seem confronted by great orange mountains with curving ledges cut into their sides. Atop them are great, greyish slabs of protecting, opaque rock—a covering like that above our Temples of Aerat—'on which the rain may never fall.' I wish that you might communicate with me, good men of my world. How go the Gods?

"But now! These mountains are lifting, and vanish from my sight. A great thing that I cannot comprehend lowers before me. It has many colours, but mostly there is the orange of the mountains. It hangs in the air, and from the portion nearest me grow out dark trees as round as myself and as tall. There is a great redness above, that opens like the Katus flower, exposing the ivory white from which puffs the Tongue of Death. Beyond this I cannot see well, but ever so high are two awful caverns from which the Winds of the Legends blow—and suck. As dangerous as the Katus, by Dal! Alternately, they crush me to the ground, then threaten to tear me from it and hurl me away."

My nose was the cavern from whence issued the horrifying wind. I noticed that my breath distressed the little man as I stared at him, so drew back.

Upstairs, the visor buzzed. Before answering, so that I could not lose the little man, I very gingerly pinched his shirt with the tongs, and lifted him through the air to the table.

"My breath! I am shot into the heavens like Milo and his rocket! I traverse a frightful distance! Everything changes constantly. A million miles below is chaos. This world is mad! A giant landscape passes beneath me, so weird I cannot describe. It does no good to try. I—I cannot understand. Only my heart trembles within me. Science nor Gods can help or comfort in this awful world of Greatness!

"We stop. I hang motionless in the air. The landscape here is utterly insane. But I see vast uncovered veins of rare, rare metal!—and crystal, precious crystal enough to cover the mighty Temple we could build! Oh, that Mortia were so blessed! In all this terrifying world, the richness of the crystal and the marvellous metal do redeem.

"Men!—I see. . . . I believe it is a temple! It is incredibly tall, of black foundation and red spire, but it is weathered, leaning as if to fall—and very bare. The people cannot love their Gods as we—or else there is the Hunger. . . . But the Gods may enlighten this world, too, and if lowered, I will make for it. A sacred Temple should be a haven—friends! I descend."

The little man's eye had caught my scissors and a glass ruler as I suspended him over my desk. They were his exposed vein of metal, and the crystal. I was searching for something to secure him. In the last second before I lowered him, his heart swelled at the sight of the "Temple"—my black and red pen, worn from use, slanting upwards from the desk holder.

A stamp lying on my desk was an inspiration. I licked it, turned it gum side up, and gingerly pressed the little man against it feet first. With the thought, "That ought to hold him," I dashed upstairs to answer the call.

But it didn't hold him. There was quite a bit of strength in that tiny body.

"Miserable fate! I flounder in a horrid marsh," the upset thought-waves came to the men of Mortia. "The viscous mire seeks to entrap me, but I think I can slowly push through it and out of this unpleasant swamp. Then I will make for the Temple. The Gods may recognise and protect me there."

I MISSED the call—I had delayed too long—but the momentary diversion had cleared my mind for new thoughts to enter. I suddenly knew what my first step would be in presenting the little man to the world.

I'd write a newspaper account myself—exclusive! Give the scoop to Earl. Would that be the sensation for his paper! Then I'd be made. A friend of the family, this prominent publisher had often promised he would give me a break when I was ready. Well, I was ready!

Excited, dashing downstairs, I half-formulated the idea. The headlines—the little man under a microscope—the world afire to see him. Fame . . . pictures. . . speeches. . . movies. . . money. . . But here I was at my desk, and I grabbed for a piece of typing paper. They'd put that in a museum, too!

The stamp and the little man lay just at the edge of the sheet, and he clutched at a "great orange mountain" covered by a "vast slab of curving, opaque glass" like the "Temples of Aerat." It was my thumb, but I did not see him there.

I thrust the paper into the typewriter and twirled it through.

"I have fallen from the mountain, and hang perpendicularly, perilously, on a limitless white plain. I tremble, on the verge of falling, but the slime from the marsh holds me fast to this land."

I struck the first key.

"A metal meteor is roaring down upon me. Or it is something I have never seen before, for it has a tail that streams off beyond sight. It comes at awful speed.

"I know. The Gods are angry with me for leaving Mortia land. Yes! 'Tis only they who kill by iron. Their hands clutch the rod in mighty tower Baviat, and thrust it here to stamp me out."

And a shaking little figure cried, "Baviat tertia! . . . Mortia mea. . . ." as Gods struck wrathfully at a small one daring to explore their domain. For little man Jeko had contrived to see Infinity, and Infinity was only for the eyes of the Immortals, and those of the Experience who dwell there by the Gods' grace. He had intruded into the realm of the rulers, the world of the After Life and the Gods Omnipotent!

A mortal—in the land of All!

In a world deep down in Smallness, in an electron of a dead cell of wood killed by processing, five scientists were grouped before the complicated instrument so reminiscent of early radios. But now they all stood. Strained, perspiring, frightened, they trembled, aghast at the proportions the experiment had assumed; were paralysed with terror and awe as they heard of the wrath of the affronted Gods. And the spirit of science froze within them, and would die in Mortia land. "Seek the skies only by hallowed Death" was what they knew; and they destroyed the machine of the man who had found Venquil land—and thought to live—and fled as the last thoughts came through.

For many years five frightened little men of an electron world would live in deadly fear for their lives, and their souls after death; and would pray, and become great disciples, spreading the gospels of the Gods. True, Jeko had described a monstrous world; but how could a mortal experience its true meaning? It was really monstrous and beautiful, was Venquil land, and they would spend the rest of their days insuring themselves for the day of the Experience—when they would assume their comforted place in the world of the After Life.

Sounds had been issuing from the apparatus—or really, they were audible thought-waves—but sounds would issue from it no more.

As I struck the first letter, a strange sensation swept over me. Something compelled me to stop and look at the typing paper. I was using a black ribbon, but when the key fell away, there was a little spot of red. . . .

THE END

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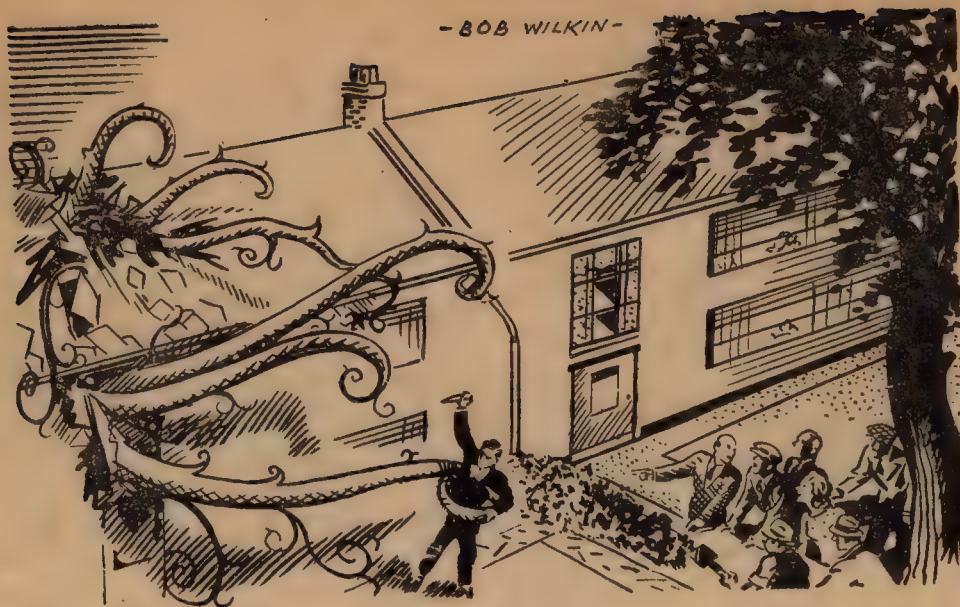
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GREEN SPHERES

By W. P. COCKCROFT

*They came in from Space, the advance guard of a greater invasion,
and Earthmen had to find a way of beating them or perish.*

AS far as is known, only five of the green spheres fell in this country, and two of them fell in Alston, my home town. They drifted down into the atmosphere of earth, at the mercy of any wind which blew, and presently sank to the ground. Looking along the edges of them, one could see through them, but in the centre they were quite opaque. They reminded me vaguely of those green doorstops we used to see at the doors of remote country cottages. Children collected those two which fell in this town. A kid in the same street in which I lived claimed one of them and bore it home in triumph. He placed it on a small table at the side of his bed; I think he worshipped it.

The other had been picked up at the other side of the town by a youngster more scientifically-minded; he had attacked it with a hammer. Yet, although it was so light that a breath of wind moved it a yard, he could not break it. He tired of it at

last, deemed it worthless, and flung it into a pond at the back of the row of houses in which he lived.

Funny to think of something like that happening to our sleepy little town; all the amazing events I had ever read of occurred in America, where most odd things seem to happen at some time or other.

The day after the fall of the spheres there was a casual mention in the press, just a line or two regarding their fall, and a conjecture about them, and that was all. Apparently they had aroused no scientific interest. A week passed, and by the end of that time the spheres were forgotten. Johnny, the kid along the street, still had his, and must have been fascinated by it. Once or twice it had been touched by a draught and had vanished underneath his bed, but he retrieved it, and after the second time it had done that he put it in a small tray. There it stayed for another week, and then it came to life.

I was up late that night, writing letters, and it was

a hot night, so the windows were wide open. There came to my ears as I wrote a musical, tinkling sound, like the shattering of glass incredibly muted; and yet it was close at hand, bell-like and penetrating, so that even after the noise had ceased its alien echo seemed to sound on in my head. I paused in my work, disturbed by the strangeness of the sound.

THEN the night was made hideous by a succession of screams. Lights flashed on along the street and I ran outside. The screams were coming from young Johnny's home, and it was young Johnny who was screaming. I rushed across the road—apparently his parents had not retired, for the door gave to my touch—and into the house. Then the screaming stopped, horribly, with a dreadful kind of finality which said that the kid would scream no more.

I dashed up the steps, and there at the top, gazing into Johnny's room with a look I have never seen before on human faces and never wish to see again, were Johnny's parents. I did not stop to ask them what was wrong, but shoved my way between them and stood looking down on the kid, or as much of him as I could see. I thought at first that there was a snake crawling across him, but I could see no head, only a repulsive and sinuous reddish-brown length that undulated across his still form; a snake-like thing which seemed to break into smaller limbs, which in turn had attached themselves to the kid's body.

With a noise between a moan and a cry of terror, the father of the kid acted. He rushed forward and began pulling at the thing on his son. At his touch several more tendrils formed and wrapped themselves around his arm. I shoved the woman out of the way quick, then, for I saw what was going to happen. A knife! I had a small penknife in my pocket, and I went forward with it open, slashing at the tendrils. But they had already got him; his screams were ringing out; and in a moment he had gone the way of the boy and had slumped to the floor—dead. Hastily I withdrew as more tendrils reached out towards me. I could not fight the thing with a penknife. Besides, the room seemed to be filled with it, whatever the horror was, for I could not name it. I pressed back against the throng of people who stood on the landing, blocking the way, and said: "Get out, for God's sake!"

They did not stop to ask why, for some of them had already seen the waving tendrils, and though they had no idea what it all meant, they did not fancy a closer examination. They tumbled back down the stairs and into the street, which was, by this time, well filled with people.

There was a babel of excited voices asking what was wrong. I looked up against the window of Johnny's room, and the crowd followed my gaze. The thing was weaving fantastic patterns against the panes with its tendrils. It was growing—fast.

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The panes splintered and smashed as the thing struggled and thrust against them, then a tendril reached through, waving this way and that, just like a caterpillar on a leaf wondering which way to turn next. Finally it reached up towards the roof and disappeared over the troughing. The limb pulsed rhythmically, thickening before our eyes.

Everyone was out of the house by this time, save those two who would never come out. Johnny's mother stood in the street, white and silent and incredulous, just not able to understand it all, or else shocked out of her senses with the horror of what she had seen. A couple of her neighbours who had seen inside Johnny's room led her away. The rest of us just stood where we were, watching the house.

ONCE I went to the door of the house, and inside was a furtive rustling sound which gave me the jitters. I slammed the door, as if under the impression that a shut door would keep it confined, forgetful of the tendril which roamed the rooftops, but which announced itself by the crash of glass as it dove into a skylight, worming its way, I imagined, after food.

And then I ran along the street, yelling for anyone inside the houses on that side to come out. By this time the police had arrived, so I told them all I knew, though I believe they thought I was either drunk or exaggerating things a great deal. They soon found out differently. The light in Johnny's room went out with a pop as the thing had a go at eating the bulb, and then we saw more of the tendrils at the lower window. By this time the thing must have penetrated the whole house. The barking of a dog within changed to a howl of agony, and then silence. I had forgotten about Johnny's dog till then. More food for the horror in the house. I visualised those questing tendrils quietly exploring the pantry, reaching for everything that was edible, insatiable and growing, and apparently indestructible. More tinkling of glass, and the panes of the lower window splintered and fell. Relentlessly the waving tentacles showed in the gap, reaching for something to grasp at.

Windsor, the local butcher, came up to it, waving one of his long knives. Abruptly he chopped at the nearest tentacle. It seemed to sense the danger, for it moved sideways very quickly, and yet not quickly enough, and the knife sliced into it. A thick, dark-green fluid welled from the cut, and a sickly, evil smell, filled the air. But those things were only details; our fascinated attention was on the butcher. Immediately he had cut the tendril through another one had whipped round and caught at the wrist which held the knife. In a moment it had fastened on the wrist and he dropped the knife with a yell of pain. Further tendrils reached out to grasp the unfortunate man; the thing was sending reinforcements to the threatened area. Many people rushed

forward to try to drag the man away as he screamed, but the cluster of tendrils waved menacingly and they stopped as the butcher fell to the ground, festooned with the things.

Several women screamed and fainted; the two policemen made a half-hearted attempt to drag the body away, but when they were sure he was dead, as he obviously was, they stepped quickly back. One of the policemen then went up the street to telephone for help, just as a number of slates came sliding from the roof, falling and breaking in the street. I could hear the building itself groaning and straining with the force inside it; suddenly the roof itself bulged upwards, shook, and then the whole mass of slates and beams was pushed completely over and came crashing down into the street.

At this speed, I thought, it would not be long before the entire street would be taken over by the monster, and probably the whole district would have to be evacuated. There were several things in my house I deemed valuable, so I edged out of the crowd and slipped into my home. It took me only a few minutes to gather what I needed into a case, and then I was outside again, but by that time a monstrous change had occurred. The ruined house looked like some kind of vase, for from the top of it sprouted a mass of waving tendrils funnelling upwards, sideways, and in every direction, ominous with alien life. Horror-struck I watched as with a roar the front of the house detached itself and was flung across the street. The growing mass inside had burst the walls apart.

More police came up, clearing the people out of the street, for one by one the houses in each directions were being made uninhabitable as the thing forced its way along the row in each direction, and dragged its sinuous length across the street to attack the other side.

I HAVE little clear recollection of the rest of that hideous night. I remember firemen attacking the cable-like tendrils with hatchets, and innumerable tendrils sprouting immediately and seizing on the firemen, and dragging them to a hideous, screaming doom. I remember an attempt to burn out the thing after a whole street was occupied by it, and how it still prospered amid the ashes. Tired and dazed with horror, I crossed town to a friend's house to seek shelter for the night. But his house was dark and silent and locked, and I knew that he must be somewhere in that tremendous crowd of people watching the flowering of that evil life. So I spent the rest of the night on a bench in the public park; a few hours of fitful and uneasy slumber, broken at dawn by the sounds of destruction and the crackling of flame.

Fire had broken out again; probably the thing itself had done it by means of fractured gas pipes and electricity cables. I got up, went out of the park and in the direction of my home to find that

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the whole district had been cordoned off and was guarded by troops. The whole district was obviously doomed, for it was burning fiercely, and somewhere, I knew, that thing of evil life was still living.

I had, of course, soon formed the opinion that the green sphere was the source of the trouble, and I recalled that another one had fallen in the town. What of that? Had that, too, come to fruition, or was there still time to check it—if it could be checked?

Reflecting that my appearance was not too good after the night in the park, I decided that I would first take a room in a hotel, preferably a long way from the stricken area. I soon found that was extremely difficult, as already all available room was being commandeered for refugees from my own district. Recollecting my friend again, I went to his home, and this time was fortunate enough to find him in. He welcomed me, fearing that I had perished during the night, as my home had been in the stricken area.

After a bath, shave and breakfast I felt much better, and we began discussing the possibilities of the thing. He listened carefully as I told him what I thought, and then he said, thoughtfully: "If I were you, I would give that angle to the chief of police. They aren't forced to know of it; the people they have interviewed might have overlooked the green sphere altogether. The fact that we have heard nothing of the other sphere does not bear out your theory that they are seeds, or surely that, too, would have been like the other. I'll switch the radio on at 9 o'clock, and see if there is any news about it. The papers have not come; the railway station is in the closed area, that's why."

My friend chatted idly until almost 9 o'clock, and then he switched on the radio. After the time signal the announcer said: "Here is a special news bulletin. The country is being attacked by a form of vegetable life about which little is known. There are, so far, four centres of infection in the country. Arrangements are being made for the evacuation of these areas. There is no need for panic. These vegetable growths appear to originate in small green spheres, which have fallen in various parts of the country and, indeed, all over the world. Scientists suggest that these spheres have an extra terrestrial origin. Various plans for dealing with the menace are being worked out, and meanwhile it is essential that the authorities have full knowledge of all spheres. Should you know of any that have fallen and have not yet begun growing, report them to your local police station without delay. There will be another bulletin at ten o'clock."

"LOOKS bad," commented my friend, switching the set off. "Anyway, I shall have to go to my work; I am late already."

"Work," I ejaculated, scornfully. "What is the

use of that? You have just heard him say that all affected areas are going to be evacuated. Well, that means Alston, for one. I believe you'd go to work if the world was ending."

"I believe I would," said my friend, seriously. "It would prevent me from panicking."

"Maybe you're right at that," I conceded. "As for me, I'm going in to town. I was right, after all, about those things being seeds."

"Better report it. After all, there'll be no harm done if it has already been reported."

"Right, I'll walk you down town, then cut across to the central police station. If that hasn't been overwhelmed yet. Shouldn't have; it's a mile and a half from the stricken part."

We set off down the road to the town. Black clouds of smoke were rising, obscuring the burning part. My phlegmatic friend left me when we reached the business section, and there I jumped on a 'bus which dropped me at the police station. I knew the chief inspector, and fortunately he was in. I told him of the second green sphere.

"Guess it is a delayed action one," he said. "It has been reported, but it hasn't started growing yet. We are just going to collect it now, Bill. Care to come along?"

"Yes; I would."

"What beats me," he went on, when we were settled in the front seat of the car, with a couple of constables in the back, "is what we are supposed to do with the blithering things. Apparently it's like having a time bomb near you—you never know when the beastly thing might go off, and the first thing it reaches for might be you. So what, if we collect them? What can we do with them?"

"Probably they are wanted for experimental purposes," I hazarded.

"Probably," he scowled. "They can have them, but why don't they tell us what they want us to do with them? That thing over there——" he nodded towards the smoke-cloud, "——hasn't finished with us yet. There's fifteen streets gone under, and we're having to clear a larger area all the time. Somewhere inside the flame and smoke, that hydra-headed monster is still growing and spreading. You know, Bill, the old town's doomed, but I wouldn't tell them that yet. We shall have to keep on clearing the people out, and let them think it's only a temporary move."

"The fire doesn't stop it then?"

"Not it! It just keeps on flourishing as if it hadn't a care. And it eats anything and everything. Or should I say everything organic? Other things it just ignores or pushes out of its way as it grows." He shuddered. "I've seen it. In its big state, I mean. There doesn't seem to be a parent body to it. The centre is just a huge mass of tentacles or tendrils—call them what you like—and they surge around, seeking food."

HE paused, and mopped his forehead with a dirty handkerchief. "That's the way it is, Bill. Maybe I shouldn't tell you, but I think the thing will get us. They don't belong to earth, these plants. They are here to take our world from us, and live on it their own unnatural life. Unnatural from our point of view, that's all. And they are stronger than us, and there is no way of fighting them. I think we've had it."

His two chins quivered with the stress of the emotion he felt. I thought he was going to cry over our lost race, and then he started shaking, as a little chuckle came from him.

"Damned funny," he said, nearly helpless with silent mirth. "We argue the toss with guns and bombs and one damn thing and another, and then when we've finished our little battles a bloody plant comes along, and we're helpless."

"I might see something funny about it," I remarked, caustically, "if I did not belong to the threatened race."

"Bill, you have no sense of humour," the inspector said, and then the car ground to a stop at the end of Long Row, and there was no need to answer that one. It was strangely peaceful here; a perfect summer's day, and to think of what was happening at the other side of town—well, the thing was incredible. We got out, went round the end of the row, and stood looking at the pond.

"In here, eh? Well, I guess it's going to stop

there, too. The equipment for draining ponds is in use on the other side of town, doing a more important job. For myself, I think the thing's a dud. All the others burst out simultaneously, you know, so why wasn't this with them? Because it's a dud. Or perhaps it was only something that *looked* like one. A kid's glass marble, perhaps. I'll put a couple of men on to watch it; that's all that is necessary. It's as safe there as anywhere in town. I'll notify London, and if they want it they can come and fish it out."

We stood there, looking at the pond. I could kick myself now, thinking of us standing there with the answer to it right under our noses, and all the time forgetting the alien origin of the plant; never dreaming what conditions could possibly be like on the planet where the things existed.

"I'm going up North now, Bill," he said, when we got back in the car. "Sorry I can't take you—if you were wanting to go. The military wouldn't let you through, anyway. I'll drop you in the centre, if you are going down."

It's queer to see the death of a town. For a long time you see people carry on, as if driven by the impetus of their normal lives, then somehow a few seem to get the idea of how hopeless it is to carry on, and then the rot sets in. That's the way it was here. Everything seemed normal, and then about noon the 'bus service stopped, and that was the first sign. Shops closed for lunch and did not re-open.

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By three o'clock in the afternoon nothing was normal any longer. The streets were filled with people, wandering about, talking, wondering what was happening in the suburbs to the north, and watching the smoke clouds rise.

Electricity and gas went off during the afternoon, and then at five o'clock the evacuation got into stride. The military took over. The town was finished. What was left of it would become a target for bombers. People just could not believe it. But the military brought in transport, and soon long lines of vehicles were streaming away to the west, away from the menace of the Plant.

I STAYED until the end, two days later, when from the heights above the town could be seen the whole extent of the evil reddish-brown growth, huge and monstrous, sprawling across a city, moving gently as it constantly adjusted itself to new positions the better to feed its great appetite. It seemed the whole of its life was spent in eating. Away to the west, the last few remaining buildings of the town lay, covered by a thick pall of smoke. A bomb had been dropped at the point where the plant had been born, but it had not killed the plant. Though blasted and torn, it had adapted itself to a way of living which nothing on earth could have undergone. My mind was filled with foreboding as I looked on the desolation, for it seemed that nothing could stop the growth. Man, it appeared, was doomed. This alien plant-life had come and man must fall to it.

I recalled recent news bulletins, which told of areas of Europe being ravished, or sterile deserts forming in the states of America, of the island of Sark, which had been covered from end to end by a plant which, having eaten all there was to eat, seemed to be starving to death, to leave behind it a brown desert of an island. That much had happened within a week of the spheres arriving. And when these plants seeded, and their seeds were blown all over the world, what then could save the world?

My mind kept reverting to the island of Sark, and I felt it should connect up somewhere with that second sphere, the one which had dropped in the pond. Looking back at it now, it seems absurd why no one saw it earlier, yet at the time it did not seem absurd. I got to thinking of that second sphere, and the fact that it never germinated. Nature didn't make such errors; given right conditions, every seed would germinate. *Then water was not the right condition!* The water either killed the spheres or rendered them harmless!

Water!

That was all that could stop these seeds!

The solution seemed clear, and I jumped off the wall on which I was sitting and set off running down to the wrecked town.

The area was guarded by the military, and as I approached a suburb a soldier came out to stop me.

"I must see your commander!" I said. He looked at me as if he thought me mad. "You cannot enter."

"What's the matter?" a voice asked, and a sergeant came out of one of the nearby buildings.

"He says he wants to see the commander."

"I must see him!" I cried. "I think I've got an idea for dealing with this plant."

He looked at me a moment, then said: "O.K., I'll take you to his H.Q., but I can't promise that he'll see you. Come on."

We walked along the street a little way, until we came to a large house standing back from the road among the trees. He checked me at the door. "Wait!" he ordered, and went inside. A few minutes later he was back.

"All right. Colonel Blandford will see you now. Come on."

HE led the way into a large, well-lit room, with maps on the walls and a group of officers talking together by a table. They straightened when I entered, one detached himself from the group and came to meet me.

"Morning," he greeted me, curtly. "What is this idea of yours?"

"Just this," I said, stepping forward and looking at the maps of the district. "This thing can be stopped, but you'll have to give up a hell of a lot of land to do so. That's the way it has to be. This is the map. You have fought this thing with bombs and fire and everything else except one thing, and it didn't seem natural to fight it with that, so you never thought of it. Neither did I till I thought of what happened to the seeds that fell in water.

"Look at this map, and you'll see that Alston lies, or rather did lie, between two rivers, the Mort and the Gloss. See? Right, there you have two natural barriers to the plant's expansion. These two rivers meet lower down, giving you a triangle of land. At the top of this triangle you have a five mile gap between the two rivers, and this gap must be made good.

"See this reservoir here? It's a good big one, feeding one of the large midland cities. Well, that city is going to be short of water for a time, because you need that reservoir. You've got to dig a channel for five miles between those two rivers—a good, wide channel that the plant won't be able to cross, and you've got to keep it filled with water from this reservoir here, because the only thing you can fight this plant with is water!

"Look at the facts, man!" I went on, as his face registered his disbelief. "One seed fell the other side of town from that first one, and it never germinated because it was in water! The one on Sark hasn't even tried to extend beyond the boundaries of the island, simply because it can't! Then check back on the weather. When it has been a clear, sunny day the plant has advanced very rapidly, when

wet it has hardly moved. But rain will not stop it, even if you could make it pour down every day and all day, because it can still get to its food. It's got to be cut off from contact with further supplies of food, and you can only do that by surrounding it with water. Then you'll have won; the tree will die and there'll be no more danger from it."

He stood thinking it over without a word for a few minutes. Then his face changed slowly, as he began to see it as I saw it, recollecting the factors that had never been considered. He swung round to the others.

"He's right; of course he's right! What stupid, pig-headed, blundering idiots we've been! God, we could have had a lot of time for the job, now we shall have to fight like hell!"

"Wright, you get on the 'phone to the barracks and get hold of all the men we've got. Take them off the gas preparation work; that's no good, and we know it. You're in charge of the organisation of the works parties."

He drew a red mark across the map. "Follow that line as closely as local conditions allow. Get hold of bulldozers and anything else you can—I leave that in your hands. I'll get on to the War Office because there are three more of these plants in the country, and they will have to be fought the same way."

WITHIN an hour the site of the channel had been surveyed, and by the afternoon work would be under way. In the same hour the news had been radiated throughout the world so that other countries might attempt to fight their plants in the same way.

Night and day the work went on, and at last, when the plant was about four hundred yards from the channel, it was finished. The weather had favoured the plant there, for every day it had been bright and sunny, but we had checked the plant to a certain extent by means of hosepipes turned upon the approaching tendrils. Meanwhile, engineers had been busy, piping from the reservoir. Now the cocks were turned on, and the channel was flooded. There were locks at several points along the channel, owing to the different height of the land in places, and there were locks at the ends so that the channel would not drain into the rivers. Blandford believed a number of men guarding each lock with a hosepipe could safely prevent the plant from creeping across the locks.

Across the last wooden bridge from the doomed area was driven all the equipment, stock, and whatever could be saved, then the supports were dragged away and the bridge collapsed. Its remains were dragged out of the channel, and then we waited for the coming of the plant, and the supreme test.

All around the plant we waited, as it touched the rivers at various points. The testing time had come. The plant halted! It did not even attempt to cross the rivers or channel. It covered the last remaining

pieces of land and then lay motionless, like a great beast that has gorged itself, a fantastic mass of tentacles that stirred less as time passed. For three days, it remained in this state of suspended life.

"It's beaten all right," Blandford commented on the third day.

"Don't be too sure yet," I said. "You've got to remember that this plant is not of terrestrial origin, and it might have one or two unpleasant surprises ready for us yet. It might even be able to think, you know."

He stared at me, then looked at the plant again.

"Hardly think that's likely. If I begin to believe that, I'll believe anything. It looks dead enough, anyway. And two of the three others have been fenced off safely. The one in the Maidstone area looks like costing us the whole of Kent, for they've had to abandon one canal—the plant was too swift for them. I'm sending them half my men to help now this is finished."

Throughout the whole of the next day and the following one, the plant remained motionless. It was closely watched night and day. Meanwhile, reports had come in from other countries of their efforts to conquer the plants, and of a tremendous area in North America which could not be cut off. Four states had fallen, and the plant was still spreading. To stop it by isolating it meant yielding more than a hundred square miles of territory and, although the channels for the purpose were being cut, the authorities had tried every other method they could think of. The area had been saturated with poison gas, and smashed at with bombs, with no result, for the gas did not affect the plant at all, and the bombs, while injuring the plant, did not kill it, but merely accelerated its progress in some hitherto unthreatened direction.

ON the fifth day after the Alston plant—as I must call it—had been localised, a difference was observed in it. In the long tendrils of which it was composed, there were forming hard nodules which became a subject of much speculation, many maintaining that it was symptomatic of its approaching death; others that it was planning some new method of attack on the race of man. I was inclined to this second belief, and that we had yet to see some more of it before it was eventually banished, if indeed we were successful in finally overcoming it.

On the sixth day these nodules were even more marked, and then, towards evening, they abruptly burst open, as a bud, and rapidly flowered. The plant was going to seed, and, if it did that, the world must be lost indeed! News came to us that all the other plants had reached a similar stage of development, and of a dramatic development in regard to the Kent one.

A certain Professor Crabley, a naturalist, main-

tained that the plant itself was dead, as far as its original form of life went, and that the only solution was for men to go amongst the tendrils and cut off all the flowers which, he believed, would not then be able to germinate. And to prove his faith in his theory that the plant was no longer a danger the good man rowed across the canal and began cutting off the nearest blossoms, stepping over the motionless tendrils without fear. His act was observed for some time with doubt, the watchers thinking that the plant could be intelligent enough to have allowed him to live that it might snare a larger number of people, but when he hacked through a tendril and showed that it no longer exuded that virulent sap which had first distinguished it, the military authorities armed the soldiers with knives and hatchets and the massacre of the flowers began.

Thousands of men were thrown into the task, starting at one end of the plant and working through it like beaters in a wood, mowing down relentlessly the great white flowers which had quickly come to full bloom. Civilians, knowing the peril which faced the country, volunteered and attacked the plant from other sides, so converging towards the centre. The news of the method of dealing with the flowering was broadcast throughout the world, and work was commenced on every plant, men working long shifts, and more multitudes of men being rushed in as they tired. No one could estimate how long a time would elapse before the flowers became seeds, which was why they worked so rapidly.

Soon after they were cut the flowers withered and died. In two days the work in this country was done, although that vast tract in America would naturally take a much longer time, if indeed it was completed in the time at man's disposal. However, the Americans concentrated on the edges of the plant, working towards the centre, knowing the seeds on the outside would have the best chance of being blown across the rivers and canals should they fail to complete their task.

At the end of three days it was reported that the flowers were dying and seeds were forming. The watchers were doubled. Fortunately, the wind did not rise to any strength in the next few days, or it would have meant the end of America. Most of the seeds fell into the dead plant, some drifted out of the area and most of these were picked up and taken to laboratories for examination. Those which survived and were not found, began to grow but were quickly isolated and died prematurely of starvation. Eventually all danger from the plants ceased as the months went by. It was evident that the last of them had been rounded up, except those which had fallen into water, and these might for ever be a source of danger to man, unless he devised some other method of destroying them quickly.

AS for the plants themselves, they slowly withered to nothing, and where they had been there

was nothing to see but an area of brown ash, fitting symbol of their destructive power. In time, perhaps, these areas will be covered over; or they may remain as a permanent reminder to man of the watch that must be kept against invaders from space—for such they are now known to be. These ashy plains were examined by experts and, with the exception of a few kept for further analysis, all the seeds were collected and deposited in the deepest parts of the oceans. Many people theorised regarding the whole event, but the statement most generally accepted in official circles was that made by Doctor Anthony Grahame, whose statement read as follows:

"We have not been able to analyse the seeds. This proves their extra-terrestrial origin; many will maintain that this proves they originated outside our planetary system altogether. This may well be so, and there are several factors which we must take into account, such as the appearance of Mars, whose entire surface resembles that seen on the site of the dead plants, namely, a reddish-brown surface devoid of life.

"It is my belief that these seeds have been deliberately discharged at the earth, as a kind of necessary preliminary to an invasion; an invasion of beings whose very nature must be hypothetical. I believe that Mars was, at some time in the past, subjected to a similar attack, and was consequently over-run. Probably, there was on Mars no organised opposition no race that could work together and fight this menace as we have done. For, remember, had we not fought this attack as intelligent beings, there would have been no world as we know it left now. The plant would have conquered and died, leaving the world ready for the invader, cleaned of dangerous germs and enemies who might have threatened his existence.

"For him, the plants were a necessary disinfecting force that must be used before he could set foot on this world. It is probable that even now, high in the stratosphere, he watches and waits; waits for the thing he must already know can never happen. He will have seen the great brown area in North America, and he will have seen that it has not spread beyond a certain area, the area in which we were successful in limiting it. He will notice that, and will observe that on this planet there are either (a) a race of intelligent beings who know how to fight back when anything threatens them; (b) conditions that are inimical to the life of his plants. He may reason, in the case of (a), that we are dangerous, as we can reason, and decide not to enter into a war against us; or (b), that if conditions are not suitable for his plants they are not suitable for him also, and there again retreat; or he may choose to subject us to a further attack with other 'disinfecting' weapons. In any case, we must always be ready for more attacks, and do what we can to meet them."

THE END



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